

Out of the darkness by Writing4Nothing

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Romance

Language: English

Characters: Dr. Alexei, J. Hopper, Joyce B.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-08-01 07:53:45

Updated: 2019-12-17 07:35:21

Packaged: 2019-12-17 14:32:32

Rating: T

Chapters: 31

Words: 38,718

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Stranger Things 3 from Alexei's point of view. Will separate from the show partway through, because our favorite Russian didn't deserve to go like that. Elements of both Jopper and Jalexei. Some mild adult themes and language.

1. Chapter 1

Disclaimer: I don't own any characters/dialogue/settings that you recognize. Any mistakes are definitely mine, though. Please read and review!

Chapter 1

June 28, 1984

Research facility in the Ural Mountains

For a brief moment, Alexei knew what pride was. The machine – his machine, even though Dr. Naoumov would receive most of the credit as the senior researcher – it was working. It was opening a door between worlds, a whole new frontier for the Soviet Union. Not bad work, for a man who wasn't yet forty.

And then it all came crashing down. The door was – fighting back? It sounded impossible, but he had no other explanation. The machine was still pumping out energy, far too much energy. It needed to be turned off. This test had failed. But that was Dr. Naoumov's call, and Naoumov was frozen. Alexei shot glances at him, hoping Naoumov would see what they needed to do, but nothing, and all the while the energy kept building.

And then it blew.

Alexei turned away, but he couldn't shield his ears from the screams or his nose from the burning flesh of the team members who'd believed Naoumov could keep them safe. General Stepanov put out his cigarette, as if he wished the ash tray was one of his scientists' skin, and led them down into the test room.

He thought he might vomit at the sight and smell of the charred corpses, but he forced the acid back into his stomach. Stepanov strode past the bodies, almost as if he didn't see them, and slapped the rock. That wasn't the best idea, after the steady stream of radiation directed at it, but Alexei didn't dare speak.

Naoumov did. He made a valiant defense. This was progress. Which it was. They had never come this far before. But after two years, Stepanov expected something more than progress. The general gave a barely perceptible glance to the giant man who had come with him, and Naoumov was lifted off the ground, struggling for breath. Alexei took the tiniest of steps forward as Naoumov slapped uselessly at the giant's arm, then stopped. Stepanov was striding toward him, not the slightest bit disturbed by what was happening next to them. Alexei kept his eyes trained on a bare patch of floor.

"You have one year," the general said, and moved on with no time for argument.

"Of course, Comrade General," Alexei managed to whisper. Stepanov gave no indication he heard him over Naoumov choking. Why would he need to? What else could Alexei say? What could he do? Nothing. So, he stood there until Naoumov stopped struggling and the huge man dropped him. Then the giant looked at him and smirked, ever so slightly. Alexei couldn't help imagine that he was thinking the younger scientist was lighter and that his thin neck would snap with only the lightest pressure.

The remaining team gathered around Alexei after the general and his muscle had left. They stood, eyes downcast, at a slight distance, while Alexei recovered himself enough to speak. When he did, he mechanically began to give orders to put the fires out, to gather up the remains and begin identifying them, to collect any mechanical debris from the machine so he could fix it, to compile the notes of everything that had happened so they could learn. The team accepted their assignments without complaint and worked silently while he examined the machine's workings. Very little appeared damaged. It had taken out its fury on the men. He knew it wasn't truly fury, only energy, but the word felt right. He checked every component methodically, forgetting the world around him until the girl who ran the office tapped him on the shoulder. He jumped and nearly hit her.

"Comrade Medvedev, I just wondered if you wanted some breakfast?"

"It's too early for breakfast."

"No comrade. It's 0600 hours. You worked all night." Alexei shook his

head in disbelief. *"Some tea, at least?"*

The banality of a cup of tea forced Alexei out of whatever fog he had descended into. *"Get out of here,"* he said. *"Do you have any idea how much radiation is in this room? Do you want your children to be monsters? Get out!"*

She ran, without asking him why he was in the room with no protective gear. It was a serious error in his judgment, but Alexei couldn't bring himself to be upset about it. If he was going to be killed in a year, what did it matter how much radiation had soaked into his flesh? He would never marry, never raise a family, and his poor mother would be told he had died in an accident, no matter what happened. Still, it was time to remove himself.

He planned to go back to his room, but an overwhelming wave of nausea hit him, and he barely made it to the bathroom they all shared before vomiting. He tried to stand up after the first round, but immediately doubled over again as the acid forced itself from his throat. Forget breakfast or a shower. He'd be lucky if he got off the floor of the bathroom that day. He sunk down and rested his cheek on the toilet seat.

Alexei had no idea how long he stayed that way. He didn't remember anything until he woke up in his room, shivering and drenched in sweat. He started to sit up, but the pounding in his head forced him back down. The girl rushed over and told him to lay back, then handed him a glass of sweetened tea.

"The doctor said you had the flu," she said. *"You need to rest for a few days."*

He had no idea if she truly didn't understand what had happened, or if she knew that radiation sickness was unacceptable and decided to play along. He decided he didn't care. No good could come from speaking the truth. He accepted the tea and laid back down.

"You said something strange earlier," she said, and Alexei felt as if his heart had stopped. He had no memory of saying anything. *"You said we're digging in the wrong place. Like we were looking for buried treasure."*

"The wrong place? Did I say anything else?"

"Something about a wound that hadn't healed. It didn't make any sense."

"Of course. It must have been the fever."

"Yes, comrade, I think it was." She nodded politely and left. Alexei laid back down and mulled it over. Digging in the wrong place – that meant something. He just needed to figure out what before he ran out of time.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2

June 28, 1985

Pripyat, Ukrainian SSR, Soviet Union

Mariya Medvedeva crossed another day off the calendar and mentally added to the total. 1,095 days since her son had gone off on a very important, very secret assignment. Three entire years since she'd received any direct confirmation that Alexei was alive, other than his brother's word. Andrei should know – he worked for the political police – but she couldn't shake the feeling he would lie to her if it was easier.

Alexei was always the one she'd worried about, the "little brother," even though Andrei was only minutes older. From the time he was a child, Alyosha had been different. Softer, somehow, more sensitive to pain or criticism. Vladislav had always been displeased with his second son. Andryusha had been able to take chastisement, even beatings, in stride and emerged tougher. Alyosha curled into himself, physically and emotionally, until she came to comfort him and draw him out again. He never went out with girls, and never seemed to have any close male friends either. Alyosha was at home in classrooms, in the library, and when he was grown, in his lab. He done well for himself, earning a university spot for physics and a plum research assignment, but before he'd left three years ago, he'd promised to make them proud, as if nothing he'd done before had mattered. She'd held her boy – she still thought of him as a boy, even though he'd be forty in a few days – and made him promise to write. He had said he would. But then he hadn't.

Vladislav had shrugged it off. Alyosha finally had important work to do, and no time to write home. But she still felt sick to her stomach, now more than ever. Something was wrong. Her boy was in danger, and there was nothing she could do to protect him.

* . * . *

Hawkins, Indiana

The loudspeaker woke Alexei at 5:30 a.m., American Eastern time. The schedule was strict, and it had to be. Underground, there was no way of keeping track of day and night, and nothing good awaited a man who lost all sense of time.

He'd spent most of the last year perfecting his machine and wondering if they would actually manage to have a lab in place by Stepanov's deadline. The general hadn't been pleased when Alexei had told him it wasn't going to be possible to open the door in Russia, not unless they mustered enough energy to blow a hole in the landscape. Stepanov's intelligence unit had located the spot of the Americans' breakthrough, and confirmed it was abandoned. They couldn't move into the old lab without attracting suspicion, and someone had come up with the brilliant plan of putting their lab below a shopping center. The capitalist pigs would fund the whole thing, without even realizing it. Alexei had still had his doubts, but the architects and engineers had done a remarkable job of creating a small city underground. The only thing they hadn't thoroughly accounted for was the human psyche.

Alexei had been there since the first rooms were constructed, about six months earlier, and it wasn't terribly different from a bunker in the Urals. Still, it wore on him, just like it did on everyone else. The new arrivals were always enthusiastic, eager to contribute and curious about what these shadowy scientists were actually trying to do. But gradually they lost interest. Their morning calisthenics slowed down, and they went through the motions of their duties, because nothing much ever happened, at least that they could see. Eventually they joined the group that pooled their daily vodka ration, so that each man could go on a bender from time to time instead of receiving just enough to warm him each day. Alexei didn't approve of drinking on the job, but he understood his betters' point of view, that the ration was necessary to maintain morale. The lab commissar arranged for movies and various contests to break the monotony, but it was a poor substitute for light and air.

He found even he was becoming slightly apathetic. He devoted himself to perfecting his work – it was the only thing keeping him alive – but he found himself tuning out the commissar's pep talks and

skipping the morning calisthenics. As a scientist, he wasn't required to do them, since the condition of his body was largely irrelevant, but he'd gone along in solidarity with the men initially. He still went to the movies and occasionally tried to find a chess partner, but even that hardly seemed worth the effort. There were whispers about him and his strange machine that killed people, and no one wanted to play with a man who was under a suspended death sentence. Sometimes he'd just lie in bed, consumed with a craving that was as strong as the desire for a cigarette, but not quite the same. It had taken him time to sort out what his body wanted. Light. Color. To see, or hear, or taste something different, even if it wasn't something pleasant. The touch of another person, even if it was just a handshake or someone brushing up against him. What he wouldn't have given to be home, eating cherries with his mother and talking about the mysteries of the universe –

He shook himself. Yearning was counterproductive. Today was the day when they would make their next test. If it worked, perhaps he could get leave. If not, he would never see another sunrise, or even hear the loudspeaker telling him to get up again.

Grigori, the giant man who had killed Naoumov, was back to check in. Alexei felt queasy whenever he was in his presence, and he got the sense Grigori enjoyed that. He never knew the man's family name. He had only one name, and it was enough to make everyone shudder.

Alexei forced himself to eat some breakfast and spent the rest of the day going over protocols and checking and double-checking anything that could possibly fail. The test was scheduled for 8 p.m. local time. He tried to take a nap, failed and settled on the only thing that could soothe him for a bit: some little figures he'd been gradually building from scraps like extra nuts and bolts. He took a marker and drew a face onto one, so it smiled at him like a poorly designed, but friendly, robot.

"Playing with your toys, doctor?"

Alexei cringed. Grigori. He could come into any room he wanted without knocking. *"Sometimes I find it helpful to distract myself for a moment. Ideas bubble up that way."*

Grigori snorted, took one of the figures and pulled it to bits and dropped them in the wastebasket. *"Is everything on schedule?"*

"Yes."

"And you understand the consequences of failure?"

"Yes."

"Good." He smirked. "Then I shall leave you to your dolls, doctor."

Alexei waited for Grigori to leave, then pulled the bits of the robot from the wastebasket. If he was still alive tomorrow, he would repair it. It reminded him of the kind of things he'd dreamed of creating, before that dream turned into a nightmare machine. Maybe after this was done, he could return to his research – no. It wouldn't do to think about that. He needed to get through today.

After supper, the team assembled for the second test. He was now the senior researcher, and he led. He and his subordinate, Fyodorov, retrieved the keys from the vault. It was a simple set of actions. Open the keys, insert them, monitor for signs of power surges or other failure, and let the machine do its work.

Then someone screamed.

Alexei jumped and turned away from the glass, the smell of burning flesh in his nostrils again. Then someone touched him and he jumped again.

Fyodorov looked at him with concern. *"One of the workers just dropped something on his foot,"* he said.

"Of course," Alexei said, trying to laugh, but he couldn't make his hands work to open the box. Fyodorov offered him a cigarette, which he took gratefully, and closed his eyes as he listed the digits of pi. After about two dozen numbers, he felt steady enough to open the box. Still, he shut his eyes when it came time to turn the key.

The machine roared to life as energy surged through it, directed at the wall in front of them. Alexei didn't look at it, though. He kept his eye on the clock. One minute without incident. Two minutes. Five

minutes. Ten minutes. Only then did he risk a look. The portal was opening, slowly, millimeter by millimeter. That was by design, to avoid a repeat of the disastrous first test. After fifteen minutes, he finally felt confident to tell Grigori the test had not failed.

Grigori was waiting in Alexei's office, feet on his desk. Alexei had no doubt he'd already searched it for anything remotely incriminating. *"Is it open?"* he asked.

"It is opening."

"How long will it take?"

"To put a man through? Maybe a week."

"So long?"

"After the last test, I thought it was better not to risk an accident."

"Stepanov gave you one year, not one year and one week." Grigori got up and stood in front of Alexei. The physicist thought that suddenly his tie felt uncomfortably tight, as if it had switched sides to work for Grigori.

"If it blew up again, it would take at least another year for someone else to repair it," he said. *"This gets him the results faster."*

Grigori considered this, then raised his hand to Alexei's neck. Alexei flinched and looked away. *"Your collar is standing up, doctor,"* he said. Alexei hurriedly flattened it. *"One week. There will not be another reprieve."*

Alexei hurriedly nodded that he understood, and Grigori left. Then he ran back to his lab.

A tiny keyhole, glowing orange, had started to appear. A door to another world. It occurred to him that he had no idea if the other side truly was orange, or if it was super-heated by the energy from his machine. Was there anything on the other side of that door, he wondered, and if there was, would it hate the creatures that burned their way into its domain? What were they bringing into the world? But that was not his concern. He'd been given a job, and he had done

it. That was all he could do.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3

All was going well. The machine was slowly, very slowly, opening the door. No one had been hurt, other than the man who'd dropped something on his foot. Then came the power failure.

The doorway didn't close, but it did pause opening. Alexei proposed simply slowing down the pace to reduce the energy expenditure, but Grigori wanted no more delays. So he ordered Alexei and one of the mechanics, Smirnov, to come with him.

Alexei wasn't trained as a mechanic – his physics work was more theoretical – but he had learned a thing or two about engines from an uncle who'd helped maintain tanks during the war. And while spending more time in Grigori's company was never appealing, it would be his first night outside since he'd come to America. He decided to relish it.

It was night, so he couldn't make out much of the landscape, but many of the businesses had bright, colorful signs. He made a game of trying to guess what kinds of things might be sold there. The "7-11" had gas pumps, so it must sell auto supplies. He already knew McDonald's sold food, and "Walmart" looked large enough that it must sell everything. That must be where the rich went to get the things unavailable to everyone else, he decided, because there was simply no way so many people in this tiny town could own automobiles. He turned the word over on his tongue. "Vallmart." Grigori gave him a sharp look in the rearview mirror, and Alexei fell silent.

The problem with the generator was easy enough to diagnose. Smirnov could have it fixed in an hour, which made Alexei feel slightly superfluous. He thought about going upstairs to drink in the night air, but decided against it. Grigori had ordered them not to leave the basement, and he didn't want to risk punishment.

They were doing well until the large American man pointed a gun at them. He said something in English. Smirnov looked at Alexei, clearly

hoping the more educated man could answer. But he hadn't studied English in almost twenty years, and the few words he remembered deserted him at that moment. He spoke as calmly as he could in Russian, to keep the American busy until Grigori returned to save them, but the woman heard the heavy footsteps. A man Grigori's size never had to bother with stealth. The American man handed the woman handcuffs and must have told her to chain Alexei and Smirnov, because that's what she did. Then she hunkered down behind the generator next to Alexei. She was scared, nearly as scared as he was, but she didn't make a sound. The man took up a position behind them, with his gun on Alexei to ensure he stayed quiet. From the muffled sounds he heard, he guessed they'd gagged Smirnov.

Alexei couldn't see what happened next, but he guessed the American man was threatening Grigori. That was a mistake. If he wanted to kill him, then he should have done it before Grigori knew he was there. Then he heard bursts of machine gun fire. The bullets ricocheted all around, and he tried to dodge them, but there was nowhere to go with his hands chained to the generator. The woman ran behind the generator, probably to hide. He didn't blame her.

Then the bullets stopped, and all he could hear were grunts of pain – maybe one of them was from Grigori? The American man was doing better than he'd thought. The woman yelled, and then she and the man came whipping around the generator.

"Come on, Smirnoff, you're coming with us," the man said as he unshackled one of Alexei's wrists and put the cuff on his own. Alexei tried to hold back, not to run with him, but then Grigori's bullets were flying at him. He ran up the stairs after the man, who was still yelling at him.

The bullets tore through the bed at the top of the stairs, and Alexei tried to jump away, but he was still shackled to a bigger man. The man threw the wardrobe on the bed – good thinking – and they ran to the truck. The man shoved Alexei into the backseat and climbed in, all the while screaming at the woman, which couldn't have helped. After a few seconds that lasted an eternity, she started the truck and they drove away, just as Grigori was exiting the house, shooting into the car. He blew out the windows, but it wasn't enough to stop them. Alexei could imagine his fury as the car disappeared

over a hill. The Americans would meet a terrible end when he found them.

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4

They drove until the truck broke down, which wasn't terribly long. The man made him get out and push it into some trees. That wasn't going to help. Grigori would notice the flattened grass. He tried to explain this, but the man clearly didn't understand a word and yelled at him some more. Then the man cuffed his hands around a tree while he tried to work on the truck.

The woman looked apologetic. She pointed to herself and said the word "Joyce" several times, then pointed to him. He wondered if he should answer. The man knew Smirnov's name, and kept calling him by it. Alexei had no idea why they'd want the mechanic, or even know his name – they must have a spy in the Russians' operation. Perhaps they would let him go, once they realized they had the wrong man? Not likely, but there was no harm in answering.

The woman – Joyce – looked happy when he said "Alexei." She clapped her hands as if he were a child saying his first words. This wasn't quite the interrogation he'd been led to expect. Maybe it was part of their partnership? The woman made herself seem like a friend, and the man would torture him if that failed? If so, it was in his interest to keep her side of the game going as long as possible, until Grigori could set him free.

He couldn't fathom why she was asking him about magnets, though. At first he thought she must mean something else, even though the word was so similar, but no. Her magnets had fallen. And then she said something about machines. Machines – machina. Who knew English and Russian shared so many words? He had no idea what that might have to do with magnets, but he could probably fix the truck, if that was what they demanded. But no. Not the truck.

She started to try again, but the man yelled. Alexei just stood quietly while they screamed at each other. At this rate, it would be easy for him to avoid giving up anything important before Grigori found him.

The man threw Joyce the keys, as if he'd fixed the truck. Alexei knew

he hadn't, but even so, the grinding startled him. He'd never worked with an American car, but that sound clearly was wrong. The man didn't understand that, though, and he crawled under the hood. Alexei searched for something in English to explain, but all he could come up with was "Stohp." The man yelled at him but didn't look up.

Alexei knew they wouldn't understand, but he kept talking anyway, to get their attention. The man took his head out of the hood and came over to yell – probably telling him to be quiet – before it ignited. Joyce jumped clear before it exploded, and Alexei couldn't resist a sigh. "Stohp," he repeated, just so the man knew he'd been right.

The man must not have liked that, because he pushed Alexei along through the forest, so he'd stay ahead of the Americans while they argued. It was hot and the bugs were biting him, but otherwise it wasn't so terrible. It was the first time he'd gone for a walk in the sun in over two years, and the woods had a nice smell. The thought crossed his mind that this was supposed to be rough treatment for a prisoner, but the Americans looked more miserable than he felt. They just weren't very good at this, he decided.

They seemed content to ignore him as long as he kept walking, and he largely ignored them, until he heard his name.

"That's why you should've listened to Alexei," Joyce said. He wasn't sure what it meant, but the man didn't seem happy.

"Oh, right, yeah, your new boyfriend, right?"

He went on ahead a few paces. Arguments were unpleasant, even if he couldn't understand the words. Then he heard – cars? Cars meant a road. It would be much easier for Grigori to find him on a road. He looked back at the Americans and decided to run. He wasn't going to outrun them with his hands chained, particularly after so long underground without much exercise, but it didn't matter. Grigori could rescue him even if they caught him again. He laughed, both at the American man screaming after him and at the joy of stretching his legs after so long. This was starting to be fun.

He stopped once he got to the edge of the woods and let them catch

him. His luck was better than he'd hoped for. There was the auto store, the "7-11." They would get some things to fix the car, which would keep them in one place until Grigori found them.

Alexei's eyes went big when they brought him inside. He didn't see any car parts, but the store must have every type of snack known to man. If he'd had money, he would have tried to grab one of almost everything. The food underground was enough to stave off malnutrition, but it was boring. He'd feel like a king with even a small fraction of this bounty. Joyce and the man went straight for the glass case in the back. They each took a red can, and Joyce handed him one. He had no idea what it was, but he drank it anyway. It was fizzy and sweet, something like Pepsi, one of only a few American products he could buy in Moscow.

He had a few minutes to explore while the man bought more of the red-can drink and what looked like a very skinny sausage. A machine with red liquid inside caught his attention, and he squirted a bit into his hand to try it. The man saw and rolled his eyes, but let him buy a cup of the delicious cherry ice.

After they'd finished, the man pushed him into the back of a yellow car. Maybe the owner was also a spy? Maybe he'd be better at it, which made Alexei shudder. But no – the man was yelling at the car's owner. Then he was telling the owner some sort of lie. That much was obvious, even without understanding the language. The man looked over several times, and Alexei figured he was part of the lie. He had no idea what the man wanted him to do, though, so he just drank his ice.

And then they were off. The music was loud and the wind was blowing in his hair as they sped away in the roofless car. Alexei couldn't help thinking that it might be all right if Grigori didn't find him for a while. This was the best day he'd had in years, even if his wrists were still chained.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Alexei felt his stomach drop when they arrived at a concrete bunker. So this was where the torture would start. The incompetent spies were just transport. He took a few deep breaths. He could avoid giving anything away until Grigori came. He couldn't give anything away, since he didn't speak enough English. "Yes." "No." "Understand." "Thank you." "Please." "Stop." He hoped he wouldn't have to use that last one too much.

The spy inside made them look into the camera. The man introduced them. "Jim Hopper, Joyce Byers, Smirnoff."

"Alexei," Joyce corrected him.

"Alexei," Hopper conceded. Alexei found himself vaguely annoyed that Hopper had been making fun of him the entire time, and that he hadn't realized it immediately, but it was the least of his problems.

The spy inside and Hopper were arguing about something. Maybe they had mishandled the operation? What did that mean for him?

The spy opened the door and immediately pointed a shotgun at his face. "*Get that out of my face, you bald American pig,*" Alexei said. He didn't know what the bald man wanted, and it didn't matter. No one understood him anyway.

The man cracked a smile. "*I may be bald, but you're the one in handcuffs, Soviet scum,*" he answered.

Oh. This was an unwelcome turn. He'd have to resist. He couldn't pretend not to understand. And this man looked like he knew how to cause pain. He walked in as slowly as he could, as if an extra second was all Grigori needed to burst through the door.

The bald man pulled out a metal wand. Alexei expected to be hit with it, but the man just ran it over him. A metal detector? If he had a weapon, why would he have let them take him? He rolled his eyes.

The detector beeped as the man moved it over his wrists, which were hanging in front of his groin. "*Watch it*," he said, and jerked his hands away. He didn't want his interrogator paying any attention to the most sensitive parts of his body.

"*Silence, scum*," the bald man responded, but then he was quickly distracted by an argument with Hopper. Joyce pulled Hopper away, and Alexei wondered if he was being left alone with this man. He didn't know if Joyce was merely acting, but he had the impression she wouldn't want to see him severely hurt. If he had to be interrogated, he wanted her in the room. But she was just arguing more with Hopper. It was even starting to annoy the bald man, who stopped searching Alexei to yell at them.

That was enough for Joyce. She started yelling at the bald man, then pushed Alexei in the chest and pushed the man. They'd brought him to this man, and the man wasn't suitably grateful. Alexei just looked at the floor and tried to make himself as small as possible. Joyce turned to him and kept yelling – something about magnets? – but he got the impression it wasn't him that she wanted to chastise. "Please," she finished.

The men were silent for a moment, and Hopper ushered Alexei inside. So Joyce was in charge, or at least the men didn't want to hear her yell again. This could work to his advantage.

6. Chapter 6

Chapter 6

It quickly became clear that the Americans weren't prepared to use torture. The bald man Murray had any number of things that could have been used to cause pain, but they stayed on their shelves. They just kept asking the same questions over and over, and he kept giving the same answers. Yes, their generators had made the magnets fall, and he was sorry about that. The generators were powering the Starcourt Mall. Why was Starcourt using Soviet labor? Where you could find technicians willing to work for less money, he countered. Capitalism at its finest. He insisted he was just a mechanic, there to fix the generators. Nothing more. They didn't believe him, but they also didn't do anything to increase the pressure. He occasionally checked the clock over Joyce's shoulder. Eventually, something would change – he would have to try something else, if Grigori didn't arrive soon. But he wasn't doing badly so far.

After a few hours, Hopper left to get food. Alexei requested a cheeseburger, French fries, ketchup (he'd heard Americans put it on everything, and he was curious), cigarettes, and another cherry ice, in the largest size possible. He wondered if he might be pushing his luck a bit, but there was precedent for indulging the whims of valuable prisoners. A few aging Nazi physicists he'd encountered at the beginning of his career had everything they could want: plush apartments, spacious dachas in beautiful parts of the countryside, personal cars and drivers, official tolerance of their unwholesome sexual appetites. An ice drink was hardly so much to ask. And anyway, they'd committed crimes against the Soviet people and still been forgiven so long as they worked. All he'd done was break Joyce's magnets.

When Hopper got back, they restarted the questions.

"Those generators you were working on, what are you powering?" Murray translated. "We know it's not the mall."

They weren't going to take the same answers. He needed a new tactic. He took a sip of the ice and tried to think. Strawberry. This

could help. He spat it out.

"This tastes like shit strawberry," he said. It wasn't a terrible taste, though he would have preferred cherry. But anything to get them off topic. The three Americans debated the ice flavor while he made an exaggerated show of cleaning his mouth.

"It's all the same," Murray said. *"Sugar on ice. No difference."*

"Tell that stupid man it is not the same in the slightest, and I would like the cherry I requested," Alexei responded. He was being difficult and probably not very likeable, but these were his captors, not his friends.

"He says forget it. No cherry," Murray relayed again.

Alexei shrugged. *"No cherry, no deal,"* he said, and turned his eyes back to Murray's television, which they'd turned on while waiting for Hopper. He wasn't sure who this bird was, but he liked his spunk against bigger, stronger animals.

Hopper looked as if he might concede that round, but then he gave a roar of rage, plucked Alexei from the chair and threw him across the table where they'd laid the food. Then he threw him back in the chair until it tipped him onto the floor, despite Joyce and Murray yelling. He immediately grabbed him off the floor and threw him up against a wall. Alexei moaned as the breath knocked out of him. Hopper was inches from his face, growling something he didn't understand. Then he threw him to the ground outside. Alexei quickly grabbed his glasses where they'd fallen before Hopper could step on them and braced for another blow.

But it didn't come. Hopper threw two sets of keys at him and slammed the door. Alexei could hear him yelling at Murray inside. "I have dealt with assholes like this my entire life!" He wasn't sure what they were saying, but it didn't matter. He quickly tried one set of keys. It opened his cuffs. He didn't bother with the other hand. He could free it later. With one hand free, he could escape. Did Hopper think he wouldn't? Or was he tired of his spy game? It didn't matter why Hopper had been so stupid. He would take the car and go back to his comrades.

He jumped in the car, which was harder than movies made it look. It started. Good. It was even playing a cheerful song for him. He'd only driven a few times, and never an American model, but it wasn't terribly difficult. He backed it up and started for the driveway. What would Grigori think, seeing him escape in a beautiful American vehicle with no help –

What would Grigori think.

He stopped. No one would give him credit for a daring escape. No one would believe the truth, that the Americans had gotten frustrated with him and thrown him out without receiving anything of value. He could claim they had roughed him up – he'd always bruised easily, and Hopper had surely left a few marks – but it wouldn't impress Grigori. Even if he found the will to mutilate himself, to cut off a few fingers, Grigori would want to know why he hadn't resisted to the point of death. And then he would make Alexei wish he'd died.

He moaned softly. There was no other option. He was compromised. Whether he wanted to help them or not, these Americans were his best chance of survival. From now on, they were his masters, and he would be their slave. He gave Hopper the keys without even bothering to uncuff his other hand. They would just chain him again. He could see Hopper knew he'd won, and he was relishing it.

"I like strawberry too," he said, even though the words felt bitter in his mouth. If there was even a shred of dignity to be salvaged, he wanted it.

7. Chapter 7

Chapter 7

Back inside, Hopper took the other half of the handcuffs off. Alexei asked Murray for a notepad and a pen. There was no point in putting it off. He drew diagrams of the machine from memory and wrote a few notes for anything that wasn't self-evident, though it seemed pretty simple to him. He pushed the stack of papers over to Murray. There. They had won. The Americans could build their own key if they wanted, or they could force him to build it. What did it matter? Then he started looking for the remains of the burger and fries. They were lukewarm and squished, but he was hungry, damn it, and didn't they know it was against international law to deny prisoners food?

"But what is it?" Murray asked.

"You can't read Russian?"

"Yes, I can read Russian, but this doesn't make any sense."

Alexei sighed. Joyce passed out the cigarettes as he tried to explain.

"He calls it the key, and this key emits a great energy," Murray translated. "It requires much strength – power. Those houses, like the one you found, they're located near transformers. They're stealing from your town's power grid."

Hopper jumped in, demanding to know if they were going to blow up Hawkins. Alexei half-laughed. Why would anyone care to blow up Hawkins? Were the Americans interested in villages in Siberia? It would have been funny, but for the memory of their terrible failures. For just a moment, the cigarettes smelled like the team's gear burning.

"There were many of these keys before in Russia, but they turned out wrong," Murray continued. "They had to come to where the –"

Murray clearly didn't understand, and now the Americans were arguing again. How did these people get anything done? It had been

useful when he'd been trying to stall for time, but now they were just annoying him. There had to be some other to explain it – he grabbed a straw and the French fry box. Hopper looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. Did American schools not use visual aids? No wonder no one understood anything.

The first attempt was unsuccessful, but then Murray got it. "They're using this energy to break through a barrier. To open a doorway. A doorway between worlds."

Alexei demonstrated the straw glancing off the box. It was good that it was of sturdy construction, or his demonstration would have looked silly.

"But it seems this key was only half the equation," Murray continued. "Location – location was the other half." Alexei gave the burger wrapper to Joyce to hold up. "In Hawkins, this door had been opened once. It was still –" Alexei searched for the right word, then settled on the metaphor his mind had offered when he was raving from radiation sickness. Murray hesitated, too, as if not sure he had the right word. "Healing." Alexei drove the straw through the paper.

"So this door is open now?" Murray relayed from Joyce. He shook his head slightly. If they'd continued their progress with nothing else breaking, it would be several days until a full-sized man could get through.

Joyce ran off. Hopper looked upset too. Alexei wasn't sure why. Yes, it didn't say anything good about their town that a foreign government had managed to operate under their noses, but hadn't they already absorbed that? The door had been opened before, with no apparent ill effects. And yes, the Americans couldn't use this other world to spy on the Soviets anymore, but so what? They still had satellites, spy planes, operatives on the ground. And in an age where both sides could kill everyone alive on the planet, what did this matter? He'd made it work because Stepanov had ordered it, and yes, he'd taken some pride in unraveling one of the world's mysteries, but he'd never believed he was truly keeping his home safe, letting alone destroying anyone else's.

Perhaps they were just tired and tense, he decided. A diversion would

do everyone good. *"Can we watch Looney Tunes now?"* he asked.

"No," Murray said, and he sounded annoyed. All right, he'd tried. He finished his cigarette while the Americans rushed around. He thought he heard glasses and sounds like their throats were burning. Were they celebrating? They didn't seem pleased with what he'd told them. It would have been civil of them to let him have a drink too, though he wasn't going to complain about it.

Hopper came back and sat on the table across from him, so their knees touched. Alexei startled. Hopper only got this close when he was going to hurt him. Why? He'd answered all their questions. Maybe he was going to be punished because they didn't like the answer? So senseless, and yet so predictable.

But no. Hopper had more questions. Could they turn the key off? Of course he could turn it off.

"Could Edison not turn off a lamp? Could Bell not hang up a phone?" It would probably annoy the Americans, comparing himself to their great inventors, but he was annoyed too, and he wanted to remind them that he had value. *"But-"* He left it hanging, because Hopper must understand.

"But what?" Hopper demanded.

"But I'm compromised." Alexei shrugged. Hopper had known it. He'd counted on it, when he'd pretended to let Alexei leave. He couldn't pretend to have forgotten that.

Hopper grabbed him and pulled him closer. He wasn't threatening this time. He was promising something. Murray translated. Hopper would get him to the key? Alexei laughed harder than he had in a long time. Good one.

Hopper let him go and he fell back. He looked as if he wasn't accustomed to people laughing at him. Alexei knew he should probably stop, but it felt too good.

"What's so funny?" Murray asked.

"I like his courage," Alexei said. *"Like a fat Rambo."* That had been one

of the morale-raising films, though he wasn't sure what message the commissar was sending. *"But even thin Rambo couldn't get there."* He laid it on a bit thick, with the greatest Russian designers and warriors, but Hopper seemed like someone who wouldn't take a subtle hint. If they tried to fight their way in, they would die, and he needed to understand. *"Breaking in is impossible."*

Hopper still looked defiant. Well, if the man had a death wish, that was none of his business. He'd told them the truth.

8. Chapter 8

This chapter contains what I consider a missing scene. Why was Alexei so okay with going back to Hawkins, where Grigori was looking for him, for what he considered a suicide mission? I try to make sense of it here.

Chapter 8

The Americans conferred and then gathered around the phone. Alexei laid down. He was tired, and nothing they were doing made any sense. Despite all their yelling, he managed to nod off. He was dreaming about walking through the park in Pripyat when someone shook him. He gasped and jumped. Had they found him? No. It was Joyce.

"We've got to go. Vroom vroom. Back to Hawkins. Come on." He was too sleepy to resist and followed her.

It wasn't until he was in the back seat of the car that it connected. *"We're going back to Hawkins?"* he asked Murray.

"Yes."

"We can't do that. Grigori is looking there."

Murray relayed the message. *"Who's Grigori?"*

"The one who shot up Hopper's truck. He will kill us if he finds us." He shrugged. "Maybe not you, Murray. But only because he doesn't know to."

"Charming fellow. I'll tell them, but don't get your hopes up." He translated. "Nope, we're going for their kids."

"Kids? What do kids have to do with this?" He groaned. "Just leave me here. I gave you everything you wanted, but I'm not going to die for you."

Murray relayed Hopper's response. *"You're not going anywhere, Smirnoff."*

Alexei tried to open the door. Bailing out on an unfamiliar road wasn't a good option, but it was better than being delivered back to Grigori. Were they somehow working with the hitman? No, that didn't make sense, but how did anything they were doing make sense? The door was locked.

"If we go back there, we die. Do you not understand that? Maybe you don't care about your life, but I care about mine! I did everything you wanted, just me go!" He wasn't giving Murray time to translate as panic took hold, but he didn't care.

He half-expected Hopper to pull over and rough him up, but it was Joyce who finally yelled. "We have to go back for my son!"

Alexei stopped and waited for Murray to translate. *"Her son is a spy?"* he asked. Joyce didn't look old enough. Murray shook his head. *"Just a kid,"* he responded.

Alexei leaned forward and touched Joyce's shoulder. *"You don't understand. They're not interested in kids. The key's not going to hurt anyone. Grigori wouldn't – well, I can't say he wouldn't hurt a kid, but he doesn't have any reason to."*

Joyce listened to the translation. "No, you don't understand." She sighed. "About two years ago, that portal opened by accident. There was a monster on the other side. It took my son. We barely got him back alive. And I am so afraid that you've given it another chance to finish him off."

Nobody had mentioned a monster to the scientists. Perhaps the spies didn't know. Maybe she was making it up. No. That was why the Americans weren't using the portal. *"Oh shit."*

She shook her head. "If you can tell us how to get down there, you don't have to come. But we have to close that portal. No matter what."

Alexei let it sink in once Murray had finished his translation. He'd had own sense of unease as the portal opened, but he'd dismissed it because he couldn't afford to disappoint Grigori and Stepanov. He squeezed Joyce's shoulder. *"I will help. But we need to work on a better*

plan."

Hopper swatted his hand away from Joyce. Alexei looked at Murray and shrugged. Murray handed him the papers he'd written on before and urged him to go over it again. The keys, the vault, the code. That part was simple. He hadn't even gotten to the armed guards and the fact that there was only one entrance when Joyce and Hopper were screaming at each other again. He sighed. They were all doomed.

Murray had had enough, though. He yelled something at them, and then silence reigned.

"What was that?" Alexei whispered when Murray had finished.

"I told them they should have sex," Murray answered.

"They have not had sex?" It was obvious that both were interested.

"No." Alexei snorted, and Murray laughed too. Then they were laughing more and more as the other laughed. Joyce gave them an annoyed look, but Alexei couldn't stop. After listening to them fight all day, he was entitled to find some humor in it.

It made sense, though. Why Hopper had hated Joyce's attempts to communicate with him and been so eager to show his physical dominance. He was going to take his horns to any rival males. Which was ridiculous, since human mating typically involved talking first, at least in his experience, and all he and Joyce had managed to do was exchange names and establish that the magnets were broken.

Once they quieted down, Alexei found himself looking out the window and wondering. Under different circumstances, he might have tried to impress Joyce. She was an attractive woman, even after all of the sweaty hiking, and she'd been kind to him. But he had no idea if they had anything in common, or if they might like each other. If she liked big brutes like Hopper, she wasn't going to see anything in him. He shook his head. It was the least of his problems.

He wasn't surprised when Hopper ordered Murray to stay with him in the car. He probably needed to talk to Joyce, and while Alexei couldn't understand them, he also wouldn't be any help finding

children he'd never met. Still, he found himself looking back to catch glimpses of the lights. It reminded him of the park with the carousel in Pripyat. He'd been a grown man by the time the city was founded in 1970 – much too old for childish things – but he'd always enjoyed walking by when he visited his mother, after she took a leadership job at the plant. The children's freedom to play made him feel a little lighter, a bit less constrained by the rules of silence around his work.

Murray suggested they could sit on the back of the car after going over the plans. Alexei appreciated that. He couldn't help smiling as he watched the lights twinkle, though he wished he could get close enough to see the people. He looked over and saw Murray looked amused, watching him watch the fair. *"They have things like this in the USSR?"* he asked.

"Similar things, yes."

"You have a family there?"

"Parents, and a brother. Never met the right woman."

Murray shrugged. *"Maybe you'll find one out there."* Alexei laughed. *"When they come – the military – we're going to do right by you. Tell them you helped us out."*

"I would appreciate that."

They sat for a moment and watched the fair. Alexei closed his eyes and thought. These Americans weren't perfect, but he liked Murray and Joyce. He didn't want anything to hurt them. He grabbed the papers.

"Haven't we gone over this enough? Vault, Planck's constant, keys, turn it off," Murray said.

"And why all this?" Alexei asked. *"If I turn the keys, it's like turning off a car. But then the car still works, does it not?"*

"Yes," Murray said, clearly not seeing where he was going.

"And do you want the car to still work or do you want it to explode?"

"I want the car to explode," Murray shrugged.

"Good. Then do this. Just make sure you are nowhere near it when it does. It is not pretty. Turns people into dust." He thought of another accident and shuddered. *"And then-"*

"It's over," Murray finished.

"And I become an American citizen and join in the fun, yes?" It was a silly thing to want, he knew. There were so many other things he needed to be concerned with. But after so long underground, it seemed like a fantasy to walk among so many happy people, under lights of every color.

Murray smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. *"Who said you had to be an American to join the fun?"*

9. Chapter 9

Things go AU in this chapter, because I refuse to accept the Duffers killing off such a great character. Please read and review!

Chapter 9

"It doesn't get any more American than this, my friend," Murray said. "Fatty foods, ugly decadence, rigged games-"

Most of it sounded all right to Alexei. He could always pick the fat out of the meat if it was too much, but he'd yet to find a cut he couldn't force down. Ugliness was all a matter of viewpoint. He looked around at the people playing games. They didn't appear unhappy, like they'd been cheated. *"They are rigged, these games?"* he asked.

"Yes," Murray said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Alexei frowned and looked at the people clapping at one of the booths. *"They do not look rigged."*

"That's just it, my dear Alexei," Murray said. *"They have been designed to present the illusion of fairness! But it's all a scam, a trick, to put your money in the rich man's pocket. That, my dear friend, is ... America."* Was Murray allowed to say this? He'd heard such criticisms of capitalism, but never from an American. It was a bit of a disappointment to hear the country he would adopt was so corrupt, but it would be bearable, if at least he was allowed to complain about it. *"But hey,"* Murray held up a string of tickets, *"knock yourself out."* He laughed as he walked away, probably at the naïve Russian.

"Where are you going?" Alexei asked. He wasn't sure if it was safe for him to wander alone. Murray couldn't protect him from Grigori – no one could – but what if the Americans realized he was a foreigner? The Russians were their enemies, and they might attack. But Murray didn't seem worried about it. He was going to find food, or something like it, whatever that meant.

Alexei took a deep breath and looked at the tickets. If Murray

thought it was safe, he would be fine. Perhaps he could find something to do that didn't require any talking.

He walked around and looked at the fair. There were booths selling snacks, but he would wait to see what Murray found before buying anything there. And if the quality was as poor as Murray said, he didn't want to risk choosing something tainted that would make him sick. He examined the rides, but decided not to try them. Joyce and Hopper could be back at any time, and they wouldn't be happy if he was on top of the Ferris wheel. That left the games.

He checked the options, but kept gravitating back to the darts. It was the perfect test case. He'd been very good at darts in his student days. A group of aspiring physicists had hustled bar games to get their beer paid for, and he was the finisher on darts. He wasn't much of a drinker, so the hustle didn't mean much to him, but it was pleasant to be valued for his contributions. He hadn't played in some years, but surely he would know if the man running the game was cheating. He watched a few others play until he was sure he needed to hit balloons of the same color, then held up five fingers and handed over his tickets.

He checked the first dart. It was straight, and certainly sharp enough to pierce a balloon. So the trick wasn't in the dart. He aimed for a green balloon and hit it with no trouble. Then he hit a second, and a third. He glanced at the wall of prizes. The toys for up to three balloons were quite small. Perhaps the next dart would be flawed. That would present an illusion of fairness, as Murray had said. He thought about checking it, but some children had gathered around, and he didn't want to hold up the line. It didn't matter – the dart flew just as straight as the others.

The kids cheered. Alexei wasn't quite sure why they were so interested, but maybe Americans weren't very good at darts. One little boy shouted something when the man handed him the fifth dart, and while he didn't understand the words, it sounded encouraging. Even if the game turned out to be rigged, it was pleasant to be around such nice people. He waited a second, for someone to jostle his arm or sneeze excessively loudly, but no one did. He threw, and the satisfying pop was almost immediately drowned out by a bell ringing. He'd won? He'd won! He smacked

hands with the children around him, especially the little one who'd been encouraging him.

The man pointed to the top level of toys. The prize was an afterthought. Perhaps he should give it to Joyce, since she had a child? He'd just wanted to know if the game was rigged. But he spotted the cartoon bird and smiled. He pointed to that one. "Dank you," he said, and the man either didn't notice his accent or didn't mind it. And that was all. No one stopped him to insist he hadn't won the toy, that there was some rule he had broken without knowing it, or that this game was for Americans only. He smiled, and his smile only got wider as he wandered off to find the others.

Murray was buying what looked like bread on a stick. Alexei waved. "*Murray! Look!*" He pointed to the toy. "*It's not rigged!*" Murray smiled and laughed like the cartoon bird. "*It's not rigged,*" Alexei repeated, and he couldn't quite convey how much that relieved him. It wouldn't have mattered so much if the game was rigged – he was accustomed to navigating a world not set up with fairness in mind. But since it wasn't rigged, what else might be possible? Anything might be.

Murray had started a little celebratory dance when a shadow moved across the field of vision. Grigori. With a gun in his hand. Alexei froze. He willed his legs to run. But where? No time. Grigori was right in front of him. He lifted the gun and fired it through the toy and into Alexei, and just kept walking. "*Traitor,*" he said.

At first, Alexei didn't feel anything. Had the gun misfired? He looked down at his torso. A red stain was spreading across his shirt, in the middle, just below where his chest muscles met. He touched the spot and stared at the blood that came off on his hand. He still felt no pain. Where was the blood coming from? And then everything slowed down, and the world went fuzzy. It was like being almost drunk enough to pass out, or vomit. Maybe he should lie down, until whatever it was passed?

Then Murray was beside him, holding him up. Murray touched Alexei's chest and his hand came away stained red. Somehow, it looked more real on his friend's hand than his own. He touched the spot again, and suddenly the pain arrived. He bent nearly double as Murray led him between two of the booths and gently helped him

lower to the ground.

Murray pulled off his overshirt, balled it up and handed it to Alexei. *"Keep pressure on it,"* he said. *"I'll get you help. I'll get help."*

Alexei wanted to ask Murray to stay, but he didn't. There was nothing Murray could do, and anyone with him would be in danger if Grigori returned to check he'd finished the job. He tried to calm his breathing and think of anything he'd heard about gunshot wounds. It was important to keep the wound above the heart, to avoid bleeding to death, but his was impossible to elevate. Nor could he put a tourniquet on an abdominal wound, even if he could figure out how to make one with his belt. There was nothing for him to do but wait and hope that someone would come before he ran out of time.

If this was the end, his father wouldn't be surprised it had come just after he'd won a toy in a children's game. Of course Alyosha would die that way. Of course he had been weak and gone to the Americans as soon as they treated him nicely. And of course he'd been executed, like a traitor deserved. His brother would agree. On the other side of the world, was Andryusha feeling any ghost of this pain? He could feel it, when his brother was hurt, no matter how much people insisted he was making it up. And his mother – what would she think? She'd never know the truth. She might not even know he'd died, or if they did tell her, it would be explained as an accident. So sad. Not even a body left to bury. He checked Murray's shirt. It was getting soaked with blood. He didn't have much longer.

"Alexei!" Joyce knelt beside him. He tried to smile at her, but it was more of a grimace. She said something to Murray, who lifted him up and started to walk with him while she ran ahead. He was so tired. The car might as well be at the far end of Siberia. He needed to rest. Then he would feel better. He tried to explain to Murray, but the man kept half-pushing, half-dragging him along. He loaded Alexei into the backseat and sat beside him, while Joyce drove.

"What's your full name?" Murray asked.

"What?"

"Full name. Patronymic and family name. Come on. Tell me."

"Alexei Vladimirovich Medvedev."

"Where are you from? Hometown."

"Obninsk."

"Is that where your family is now?"

"No, in Pripyat." He groaned. Why was Murray asking him all these questions? *"Please let me rest."*

"Nope, no rest until we get to the hospital. How many siblings do you have?"

They stopped only long enough for Hopper to jump in the car. He was carrying a radio playing communications in Russian. He handed it back to Murray to translate, who ordered Alexei to help him, even though he didn't need help. It sounded like they were talking about children in the mall, and Alexei wondered just how far gone he might be, to hear that.

Then the Americans started arguing again. Alexei didn't understand the words, but he guessed. They were deciding whether to lose the time taking him to a hospital, or to go to their children and let him bleed out. He didn't say anything. They would choose their children. Anyone would. At least his last day hadn't been spent underground.

He laid his head back on the side of the car and closed his eyes. The night air was pleasant on his face. It was time to rest.

10. Chapter 10

Chapter 10

The room was a dazzling white. Alexei blinked as his eyes adjusted. Everything was fuzzy. He tried to sit up, to find his glasses, but pain knifed his abdomen. He settled back with a groan and tried to rub the injured spot, but his hands were strapped down. A tube was running into each arm. He tilted his head to check the straps. They were simple enough, but he'd need a free hand to operate them. Whoever had him didn't want him running away. So which side had him?

There was light coming in through a window. So he wasn't underground. He strained to hear any conversations in the halls, to pick out what language was being spoken, but everything was silent. He couldn't see the label on the fluids being pumped into his veins to check the alphabet, let alone read what it was – but it couldn't be too terrible, could it, if he had the presence of mind to remember the Americans used different letters? He was in pain, but his head was quickly clearing.

He wondered if Joyce and the others had found their kids, and if they'd gone through with the plan. He hoped they'd come to their senses, but he doubted it.

Someone knocked on the door. A tall, dark-skinned woman in a white coat looked in. She said something he didn't understand. He smiled. She might have been telling him they'd found a giant tumor next to the bullet, for all he knew, but she was speaking English, which meant he was safe. She looked like she expected him to respond. He shook his head. "Not understand."

She nodded. "Espanol? Francais? Deutsch?"

"Russkiy."

"Russian?"

It sounded similar enough. He nodded. She said something that sounded vaguely apologetic. He smiled and shrugged. You couldn't

really expect good interpretation services in a small town. She ducked out and came back with a white board and a marker, and a sheet of paper with pictures on it. She unbound one of his arms, and he pointed at the picture of a glass. "Please?"

She shook her head, and explained something. She pointed to one of the tubes in his arm. So it was keeping him hydrated. He wasn't sure why he couldn't have a drink to moisten his mouth, but he couldn't very well argue with her. And she certainly didn't seem to be trying to make him uncomfortable.

Not much happened for the rest of the day, other than when one of the nurses came to change his bandages. He sneaked a look while she worked. A long scar split his abdomen in two. It looked red, and he whimpered when the nurse rubbed some sort of cream on it. She gave him a pity smile and asked something. He shrugged. She held up a needle and a vial of something. She was asking if he wanted it? She didn't seem to be threatening him with whatever it was. Probably some sort of pain medicine. Still, no sense in taking the chance. He shook his head. She applied new bandages, patted his hand and left.

He slept fitfully, from the beeping machines, the nurses coming and going and the frightening images his mind conjured up when he closed his eyes. He finally managed to drift off around dawn, and it seemed like he'd barely slept at all when his door opened. Two people came in and sat down. The man was in late middle age, with grey hair and a slight potbelly. The woman was younger, maybe about his age, and her features looked somewhat Russian.

"Hello, Dr. Medvedev," the man said, and the woman translated. "Irina and I have a few questions."

Alexei tried to sit up, but pain radiated from his scar. *"Excuse me for not getting up, but-*

The man brushed it off. "We're not concerned with etiquette."

"May I ask who I'm talking to?"

"Does that matter?"

"I suppose not. I just wondered what I should call you."

"You can call me Agent Johnson. You don't need to know exactly who I work for, but they can make your life much easier or much harder, depending on what you decide."

"How much do you already know?"

"Excuse me?"

"I don't want to waste your time. If you already know about the lab under the mall, no point explaining it again."

"Start at the beginning. I'll let you know if I want you to hurry it along."

So Alexei started back at his old lab in Russia, with the idea of building a machine to convert waste from nuclear plants into a new source of energy. He'd built the first key – he'd called it the alchemist then, partly out of whimsy – and was making good progress on establishing procedures so it could heat water, turn turbines and generate electricity. Then military intelligence had shown up.

"So you're telling us it wasn't intended as a weapon."

"Oh no. It wouldn't be a very good weapon. You can blow things up with it, but you can't just drop it out of the sky like a bomb. You'd have to set it up right around whatever you wanted to destroy. And it's got a very small blast radius."

"Sounds like a design flaw."

"Like I told you, it wasn't supposed to be a weapon. It's a way of getting more energy out of radioactive waste."

Agent Johnson harrumphed. "And what did military intelligence want with your waste recycler?"

"They said they needed concentrated energy to break through a barrier. I didn't know what they meant. They just told me to take a few days, go tell my parents I wouldn't see them for a while and then report to their Kiev office for further instructions."

"And then?"

"They took me to a secret facility in the Urals. I was blindfolded for part of the trip, so I can't tell you where it is."

"Of course you can't."

"They were trying to create a portal between worlds. They said the Americans had done it before and we needed to catch up. You know about this, yes?"

Agent Johnson's face betrayed nothing. Alexei sighed, and guided him through their failures, Naoumov's death, his epiphany about location, the building of the underground fortress, the successful test, how the Americans kidnapped and recruited him to their side, and finally how Grigori had shot him. He left out the balloon darts and the cartoon bird, because it sounded silly now.

"And that's all?"

"That's all I know."

"Nothing else important?"

"No." He paused. *"Did they do it?"*

"Do what?"

"Blow it up. Close the portal."

"That's not your concern."

"Are they alive? Please tell me that. Is Joyce all right? Murray? Hopper?"

Agent Johnson hesitated. "The newspapers are reporting Police Chief Jim Hopper died when the Starcourt Mall collapsed. The full fatalities are still being determined."

"Joyce is a tiny little woman with dark brown hair. Did they find a body like that? Please, tell me they didn't."

"Why so interested?"

"She was kind to me. So was Murray."

"Friends?"

"Yes. I-I thought so."

Agent Johnson harrumphed again. "They're alive. Don't ask to see them. We're still deciding what to do with you."

Alexei nodded. The agents collected their notes and left him alone in the white room. He let his head roll to the side, suddenly exhausted by everything they had asked. The Americans might not give him the welcome he had hoped for. Agent Johnson hadn't seemed pleased, but that could have been a tough front. Well, he'd told them the truth. There was nothing more for him to do but wait to get better, or for someone to tell him where to go. At least Joyce and Murray were all right. He hadn't liked Hopper, but he hadn't wanted him to die. Still, if the others were alive, they must have succeeded, he decided. Whatever the Americans decided to do with him, he'd done right by the people he cared about most. That was something.

11. Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Agent Johnson and Irina came a few more times with questions about his previous work, his family and everything else. They also went over the whole story again three more times, to catch him in a lie, he supposed. Agent Johnson didn't believe that he and his mother both had worked on civilian nuclear power despite coming from a KGB family, but he couldn't prove it wasn't true, mostly because it was true.

The pain in his abdomen had faded from unbearable to merely bothersome, and the doctor had allowed him to start taking some liquids by mouth, though he still couldn't have solid food. He was getting pretty good at using the board to draw whatever he needed, and the nurses sometimes brought him sweet liquids or hard candies to suck on as a treat. He might have been their easiest patient, since he couldn't ask for anything except some water or help managing the tubes when he needed to use the WC. And he'd always smile and nod at whatever they said, which seemed to please them.

After he'd been in the hospital for about a week and was allowed to eat tiny amounts, Agent Johnson returned with a manila folder. "My superiors were satisfied with your cooperation," he said, though he himself looked anything but. He pulled out documents and laid them on the bed while Irina explained: a driver's license for identification, a green card so he could find work, a fake Soviet passport stamped to make it appear he had entered the country legitimately. "We don't have any immediate need for your services, but I suggest you lie low and avoid trouble. We will be watching, and I'd guess we're not the only ones."

Alexei thanked them and quickly gathered up the documents after they left. His old life was gone forever, and his new life was in this manila folder. Panic gripped him as he realized how insubstantial it was. They'd given him the basic tools to start a life, but he had no idea where he might sleep, what he might eat, if he could find work without speaking English. The hospital was a comfortable cocoon, but he couldn't stay there forever.

Then someone knocked on the door. "Yes?" he asked.

The door flung open, and in marched Joyce, with Murray behind, looking somewhat embarrassed. She checked his forehead – he didn't think he'd ever had a fever, but that was beside the point – asked him how he was feeling, and then launched into a tirade about the government types who'd kept him under lock and key for so long, barely giving Murray time to translate. Alexei reassured her he was fine. The government types had taken good care of him. He showed them the identification cards, and Murray commented it was one of the better fakes he'd seen.

"I'm sorry about your friend Hopper," he said. Joyce nodded, but she clearly didn't want to discuss it. *"The children are safe?"*

"They are. We closed it."

"Good."

The doctor came in with some forms for Joyce and the nurses gave his injuries one last look, while Murray quickly explained it all. He was ready for discharge, and Joyce had agreed to give him a place to stay, at least in the short term. He'd need to be careful not to tax his stomach with large meals or to tear his stitches with heavy lifting. And no more than one alcoholic drink a day, since they'd had to remove half his liver. His stomach would eventually expand to its original capacity, but it wasn't clear how much his liver would recover. Alexei shrugged. He'd never been much of a drinker anyway, and he felt all right, considering that half of two major organs had been blown away. The bullet was still embedded in the muscle of his back, and it was less damaging to leave it than to dig it out. He asked Murray to translate his thanks to everyone, and then they left him to put on the clothes Joyce had brought.

They'd cut off his old things when he'd gone into surgery, and the shirt and the T-shirt were beyond fixing, anyway. He did get his old shoes back, though, which was a relief. It had taken him weeks of searching every department store he ran across to find a comfortable, sturdy pair in his size. Joyce had bought him more or less the same clothes they'd found him in, which was thoughtful. They were a little big, but perhaps she'd decided it was better to err in that direction

than for the clothes to be too tight. Or maybe he'd just lost some weight, with most of his nutrition coming through an IV. Either way, it was nothing he couldn't cope with by cinching the belt a little tighter.

Murray joined him in the backseat and explained what the kids were calling the Battle of Starcourt while Joyce drove. Apparently there was some sort of monster made of melted people that wanted to kill Hopper's daughter. He asked questions and repeated that back several ways, sure that Murray's vocabulary had failed him somehow, but when he kept getting the same answer he simply accepted it. Hopper had mowed down several soldiers and they'd stolen their uniforms. Alexei winced at that. Those men hadn't deserved to die. He didn't know if there was another option, but he also couldn't imagine Hopper worrying too much about the Russians he'd killed. Then Murray had gone through the vents to create a distraction, giving Joyce and Hopper a chance to find the vault and get the keys. Alexei didn't understand why they had sent the only one who spoke Russian to create the distraction, but he doubted Joyce and Hopper would have agreed to be separated. Then Grigori had found them, and Hopper had had to kill him before Joyce had blown up the key.

Alexei let it sink in a moment. *"My machine killed him."*

"Joyce doesn't blame you. You didn't know what you were doing."

It was true, he hadn't, but the heart wasn't logical. Still, Joyce couldn't hate him too much, if she was giving him a home. He was surprised when they pulled up to a small house. He hoped whatever family shared the house with hers wouldn't mind a new neighbor. Well, he was quiet, and clean, and accustomed to tight quarters, so he couldn't bother them too much.

Murray followed them in as Joyce gave him the tour of the house, which apparently she didn't have to share with any neighbors. He hadn't imagined Joyce was so wealthy. She showed him the kitchen, the bathroom, the boys' room, the room where Hopper's daughter had moved in. That was unwelcome. Hopper's daughter would definitely hate him. Well, he would take any blame she needed to give.

Joyce apologized that the couch was the only space available.

Someone had set up a folding panel to give him a little privacy, and it made a serviceable little room. He assured her it was quite enough. He and his brother had shared the living room until their grandparents had died and freed up a bedroom, and after that he'd lived in dormitories or communal-style apartments. And he had a window, which made this arrangement immeasurably better than living below ground.

They all chatted as best they could until the sun got low and Murray decided to go back to his home. He slapped Alexei on the back, then apologized when Alexei grimaced. *"Good to see you well,"* he said.

After Murray left, Joyce heated up two plates of some sort of layered noodle dish. It was good, but Alexei could only manage a few bites before his stomach was groaning. Then they lit cigarettes and listened to the night settle around them. Joyce looked far away, until something seemed to jolt her back. She went and grabbed a small package, wrapped in colored paper. A gift? He didn't deserve a gift, but he didn't know how to tell her that, so he opened it and smiled. A small Russian-English dictionary. This would help.

"Dank you," he said, then flipped through the pages to complete his thought. "You. Are. Kind. Friend."

12. Chapter 12

Chapter 12

August 1985

Alexei found he liked living on Joyce's couch better than he would have anticipated.

He'd quickly learned everyone's morning routine and managed to time his own around it. Not that he had anywhere to go – he and Joyce had agreed that it was safest for everyone that he not attract attention to himself, in case the KGB had any stray agents left in Hawkins. So each day was much the same: breakfast and attempted small talk with Joyce, a few chores like doing the dishes and sweeping the floors, and then studying English. Every day, Joyce brought home new beginner's books so he could practice the words he needed to have memorized. It wasn't going too badly, except for the time she brought home the ones full of words that weren't in his dictionary. It was only after he'd asked if a lorax was a real North American animal that she realized she'd made a mistake. Still, it had been good practice decoding the sound of words, even if they were nonsense. He felt a little silly, reading children's books, but what else could he do? And he was making progress. Soon he'd be ready for chapter books.

His stomach was gradually getting used to a more normal amount of food, though he'd lost some more weight since leaving the hospital. In those first weeks, he'd needed to rest after ten minutes of most any activity. He barely spoke to the children, since he was asleep on the couch most any time they were around. They probably thought he was lazy. So as he'd started to recover, he asked Joyce for more chores he could do while she was away. He'd even tried making dinner a few times, but everyone seemed to agree he used too much onion and garlic. Perhaps it was a cultural difference.

He hadn't really minded staying indoors for the past few weeks either – he simply didn't have the strength to go anywhere. And he had any number of windows to look out, which was a vast improvement over life underground. Still, as he started to go longer periods without rest,

he began to wonder about the woods behind Joyce's house. One small walk couldn't hurt, and anyway, he needed to move more if he was to regain his strength. He'd just go as far as the wood pile.

It was hot and the bugs were flying, but the woods still smelled clean. He smiled. Joyce had a delightful property. He stopped at the wood pile and decided to wait just a moment before heading back to practice some more English. Then he noticed a wood sign laying on the ground. Castle Byers.

He examined the pile again. It wasn't firewood. It looked like it had been some sort of structure, perhaps a child's fort. Some hooligan must have knocked it down. Perhaps it was fixable. He surveyed the damage and made a mental image of what it must have looked like. This wouldn't be too difficult. He took off his shirt and folded it over a tree branch. It wouldn't do to get it dirty. Then he slowly, very slowly, started to move pieces back into place. He had to stop several times for rest and to get water, but he was pleased with the progress.

"What are you doing?" Alexei jumped and turned around. Joyce's younger boy. Will.

"Fix it," he said.

"Why?"

It hadn't occurred to him to think about why, let alone how to say it in English. "For kid?" No, Will didn't understand. He pointed at Will and himself. "Ve fix?"

Will shook his head, but smiled. "Yeah, okay. We can fix it if you want."

It went much faster with two people working together. They worked mostly in silence, though Alexei found himself whistling. This was quite pleasant, the sort of thing he'd imagined himself doing if he'd ever had a son. When they finished, he handed the sign to Will. "You do," he said. Will shrugged, but hung the sign over the door.

"It'll be nice for the next kid who lives here," Will said.

"Next kid?"

"Yeah, you know, after we move."

"Move?"

"Yeah, move. Mom's selling the house. Sorry, I thought she'd told you."

Alexei was quite sure she hadn't. Suddenly, the strain of the afternoon hit and he felt indescribably tired. His back, his abdomen, his arms and legs suddenly burned and felt like they were filled with lead.

"Are you okay?" Will asked.

"Tired."

"Come on. Let's go inside. Mom will be mad I let you wear yourself out."

"Vy mad?"

"She worries about you. You know, moms."

"Yes, moms."

"Come on, let's get you a snack and some water. You'll be okay."

Alexei nodded. He would be okay. But he would be much, much better if Joyce wasn't leaving, or if he could go with her.

13. Chapter 13

Chapter 13

Buffalo, New York

November 1985

The house was quiet when Alexei got home from his night job. He tiptoed across the squeaky floorboards to the kitchen. It was too late for dinner and too early for breakfast, but he was hungry, and there was no point in going to sleep on an empty stomach if you didn't have to.

In four hours, he'd need to be up again for his day job. Joyce had found work in a grocery store, manning the cash register, and helped him get on as a bagger and shelf-stocker. It wasn't bad work, though sometimes he marveled that this was what he was doing with a Ph.D. in nuclear physics. Sometimes the customers were rude and told him to go back where he came from, but most just wanted to take their groceries and get on with the day. He wondered what they would say if he ever told them he couldn't go back, because the KGB would kill him.

He could usually grab a brief nap between shifts, though sometimes he ended up chatting with Jonathan. The boy was mature beyond his years, and he seemed to appreciate having someone else fill the role of the adult man in the house. It was because of Jonathan that he'd taken the second job. The boy had talked about how much he would have to save up if he was to go to college next year. It seemed barbaric to Alexei, charging people who wanted to improve their minds, but no one cared about his opinion. So he was quietly setting the extra money aside in a bank account, to help fund the boy's dream. He wasn't likely to have a family of his own, and for now he was quite content paying Joyce a little rent for all the comforts of home.

And the second job wasn't bad either. He washed dishes in a greasy little diner. It was completely quiet once the customers left, except for Hay-Zeus, who came to clean the dining room. Hay-Zeus didn't

speak any more English than he did, but they had a friendly co-existence, switching the radio station when the other's back was turned and trying out words they'd just learned.

He found the ham and cheese and started to make himself a sandwich. He was humming a bit of a song he'd heard earlier when a floorboard creaked behind him. He stopped and willed himself to breathe. He peeked out behind the refrigerator door and sighed. El. He really needed to stop jumping at every sound and shadow. He held out the ham. She shook her head.

"Not sleeping?"

She shook her head. "Bad dreams."

He poured her a glass of milk. "You want to talk?"

"How did Hopper die?" The easy answer was that he wasn't there. That could be interpreted as that he didn't know. But he did know. He knew all too well. "Joyce said there was an accident with the machine opening the door. But she doesn't want to tell me."

He hesitated. How would he have explained the details to a child, even if he knew the language? But the details weren't what she really needed. "It was like-" He snapped his fingers. "Here, den not."

"It didn't hurt?"

"No hurting."

She nodded. "Thank you."

"You try sleeping?"

"Yes. Good night."

"Good night."

He sighed and put the sandwich back in the fridge, having lost his appetite. It had been less than six months, but the whole thing seemed surreal, like something out of someone else's life. Or perhaps that had been his life, and now he was living someone else's. Maybe

he was meant to die in that explosion, and Hopper would be sharing this home with Joyce and her wonderful family. Other than his mother, no one would have cared. He shook his head. There was no point following that line of thought. What was done was done. Hopper was dead and he was alive. The only thing he could do was make his life count.

14. Chapter 14

Chapter 14

Buffalo, New York

December 24, 1985

Alexei settled onto the couch next to Joyce and took a sip of his hot chocolate. It was the first time the two of them had sat with nothing to do in weeks. The house hadn't been silent for even a moment when Jonathan's girlfriend Nancy and Will's friend Mike had visited for the feasting holiday Thanksgiving, and then the whole world had seemed to pick up speed as people bought more food, clothes and knickknacks than they could ever possibly need. He'd continued working both his jobs, and Joyce had picked up extra shifts to pay for train tickets to send the boys and El back to see their friends, while calling all of her friends to make sure each child would have a bed. He'd offered to watch the house if she'd wanted to go, but she hadn't taken him up on the offer. Maybe she'd wanted this quiet time too.

Joyce offered him a candy cane, as she called it, and what already seemed like a perfect drink was somehow even better. He smiled as they watched the snow fall. He'd need to shovel again tomorrow, but he didn't really mind it. The Americans seemed to think the winter was terribly cold, but it really wasn't – just wet. And though he'd never admit it, he liked it when he was out shoveling and the neighbors waved to him. Because they accepted him as another American like them, clearing his patch of sidewalk. But also because of the unspoken assumption. He was a man doing this chore for a woman he lived with, and people interpreted that one way. They couldn't know he slept on the couch, and he felt that gave him a certain dignity.

"What do people do in Russia on Christmas Eve?" Joyce asked.

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

He thought a moment. "People do New Year's. Not Christmas." He pointed at the tree twinkling in the corner. "Ve had a New Year's tree. New Year's presents."

"New Year's hot chocolate?"

"New Year's vodka."

Joyce smiled. "Do you make New Year's resolutions?"

"Vat does dis vord mean?"

"Things you want to do better next year. People say they'll lose weight, or quit smoking, or start exercising."

"I do not dink ve do dis."

"You're not missing anything. Nobody keeps them."

"Den vy dey do it?"

"Because people always think this is the year when they'll do better." Alexei nodded. Americans were optimistic like that. It was understandable. They had so much already. Why wouldn't they believe everything else was in their grasp?

They sat in a comfortable silence for a few moments. "Ven do Americans give de presents?" Alexei asked.

"Normally on Christmas morning, but we could do it tonight if you want. It's not like we have to wait for Santa."

"Vat is Santa?" Joyce explained the old man who flew around giving toys. "Oh, dat is Grandfadder Frost."

"I like that name. Grandfather Frost."

"So ve can give presents?" He probably sounded like a child, but he'd been itching to see Joyce's face when she opened her gift. She laughed and pulled a box from under the tree. It was wrapped in shiny red paper with a green bow. He carefully removed the tape, in case she wanted to save the lovely wrapping, and opened the box.

Inside was a dark blue jacket, with a knitted black hat and gloves. He held up the jacket. It was thick, with padding on the inside.

"I know you say you're not cold, but it's going to be a long winter," she said. He smiled and thanked her. Even if it really wasn't cold, he would have joyous thoughts every time he put it on, because she had thought of him. Then he grabbed the card he had bought for Joyce.

She smiled as she opened the card, which had a picture of a Christmas tree and what seemed like an appropriate greeting on the front. Then her mouth dropped open when she saw the check.

"For Jonadan's school," he said.

"I can't possibly accept this."

"A gift."

"Yes, it's very generous." He wasn't sure of that word. "Very kind. But where did you get this much money?"

"Night job."

"I thought you were saving up for your own place."

Oh. He had misunderstood all along. He had thought Joyce liked their arrangement as much as he did. Foolish Alyosha, always going where he wasn't wanted. He stared at the jacket in its box. Suddenly its meaning was absolutely clear. He needed to find his way out in the cold. "You want me to go."

"No, no, I didn't mean that. I just thought you'd be tired of sleeping on the couch."

"It is comfortable. But I go soon."

"Alexei." She took his hand. She'd never done that before. He stared at her little fingers. "All I meant was that I never expected something like this. No one has ever done anything so generous – so kind – for me. I'm lucky to have such a friend." She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. He held onto her just a fraction too long, hoping his blushing would subside. "I'm happy to have you here as long as you

want to stay." He wanted to stay forever, but it seemed the wrong moment to say it. He just smiled and nodded.

Later, after Joyce had gone to bed, he laid on the couch and wrapped himself tight in the blankets, pretending she was hugging him again. His cheek tingled when he thought about being kissed. It had been more than three years since he'd had any kind of physical affection. Joyce didn't know it, but it was the finest gift she could have given him. He smiled in the dark. Perhaps he would try this American custom and make a resolution: next year, he would make Joyce Byers so happy that she never wanted to stop kissing him.

15. Chapter 15

Chapter 15

Pripyat, Ukrainian SSR, Soviet Union

April 26, 1986

Mariya Medvedeva stirred as the phone rang. It was still completely dark. Vladislav got up to answer it. It was unusual for him to be called out in the middle of the night anymore. That typically fell to younger agents still proving themselves. Whatever it was, it must be severe. She laid still and waited.

Vladislav shook her. *"For you,"* he said.

Why would anyone call her in the middle of the night? Something must have happened to one of the boys. Alyosha would want to talk to her, if he was in trouble. Her heart beat faster as she took the phone. *"Hello?"*

"Comrade Medvedeva?"

It wasn't one of the boys. *"Yes, speaking."*

"We need you to come in right away. There's been an accident at reactor four. We're sending a car."

Mariya turned on the light and started to look for the clothes she'd set aside the night before. *"What kind of an accident?"*

Buffalo, New York

April 29, 1986

It was finally starting to get warm in Buffalo, and Alexei was in high spirits as he washed and got ready for work. Joyce wanted to take a day trip to some waterfall over the weekend, and they would bring a picnic for the children. He wasn't sure if the waterfall was as special as the Americans seemed to think, but it would be pleasant to sit out in the sun and feel the grass under his feet.

Joyce had already made the coffee and was eating her cereal. He made his own cup and tousled her hair playfully before sitting down. It had been slow going, getting closer to Joyce, but they had established that this small sign of affection was acceptable. The early morning was his favorite part of the day, before the kids were up trying to beat each other to the bathroom and secure the last bit of milk in the carton. Not that he really minded the disorder. He wasn't these children's father, but he was gradually acquiring the authority to tell them to take turns or that someone could eat something other than cereal. He still didn't understand the American's love for cold grain, but it meant no one ever took the last bit of Cream of Wheat.

"Vat does de paper say today?" he said, as Joyce sipped her coffee. He'd started asking her back when he could only read children's books, and while he'd improved enough to read most of the articles now, it had become a habit and a way to start conversation.

"There's something about a nuclear accident in the Soviet Union," she said.

"A accident?" She handed him the paper. He bent over the paper and ran his fingers under the words until he got to the second paragraph. The accident was reported at the Chernobyl nuclear plant, in Pripyat. He reread the sentence several times, hoping for some sign that something had been lost in translation. But no. He labored over the article until he got to what he needed to know: two people had been killed in the accident. Or rather, the government had admitted two people had been killed, which might mean dozens were dead. The article said nothing about who they might have been. He stared at the paper, willing more words to appear and answer the one question burning in his mind: was his mother safe?

"Alexei?" Joyce touched his shoulder. He jumped. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. I am fine." He set his features into what he hoped was a neutral expression. He had no desire to break apart in front of Joyce. "I just vonder vat happened."

Joyce shrugged, and proceeded to tell him about something Will had said the night before. He managed to reply something that sounded appropriate, but in truth he was half-listening, at best.

He kept his mask up through the work day. Every Russian had one perfected. It was safest, among strangers, not to respond to anything, in any way. You could walk from one end of Moscow to the other without encountering any sign of another person's emotions, unless you ran across a friend. He rarely needed the mask anymore, but it felt safe that day. If he focused on keeping his emotions locked away, they couldn't drown him.

He tried to surreptitiously find any news he could, listening to public radio instead of music while he washed dishes and pouring over any newspaper he found, but he knew it was hopeless. They probably weren't releasing a list of casualties in the Soviet Union, let alone allowing such information to reach the West. But he couldn't stop himself from hoping that some stray bit of information would somehow slip through and reach him. A face in the background of a photograph. A quote attributed to Mariya Medvedeva, one of the plant's physicists, telling some lie about how everything was fine. Anything.

He thought he was doing well, but by the end of the week, the manager called him over to give him a firm talking-to. The customers were complaining that he wasn't smiling at them. Why did Americans demand that service people smile? Surely capitalists didn't need to believe labor was a joy. And in the stores he used to go to, you were lucky if they deigned to give you whatever you were trying to buy. But he nodded and promised he would smile.

He tried, but a forced smile was much harder than a mask. He must have done it wrong, because people gave him funny looks when he thanked them for shopping. Most of them went on with their days, though, and the manager didn't seem to be paying attention to him.

"Dank you for shopping, do you want help to your car?" he mechanically asked the man picking up potato chips and cigarettes. The man stopped and pointed at his nametag.

"Alex? Bullshit. What's your real name, Alex?"

No one had asked that before. Was he supposed to answer?

"Hey, I'm talking to you. What, you don't understand English?"

"Alexei. My name is Alexei."

"Another Russkie."

Where were these other Russkies? "Yes sir."

"Why don't you go back where you came from?" Alexei just turned back toward the bags. "I'm talking to you." The man pushed him. "Go home, commie."

Alexei shook his head. "I can't."

"What? What'd you say?" The man pushed him again, harder.

"I can't." Alexei turned and looked at the man. "The KGB vill kill me."

"What?"

"Ven you leave, you can't go back. Ever." Alexei buried his face in his hands. "I can't even call and ask if my mother died when de plant-" He couldn't remember the word for an explosion, so he put his hands together and pulled them apart, fast. "Chernobyl."

The man looked uncomfortable. "Yeah well, learn to speak English," he said, and hurried off with his bags.

Alexei took a breath and painted a smile on his face for the next customer. He could feel Joyce's eyes on him, from her checkout line. How much had she heard? It didn't matter. He stacked the cans in the bag and laid the bread on top. "Dank you for shopping, do you vant help to your car?" he asked the old woman.

"Yes, please," she said, and he carried her bags to a slightly worn Oldsmobile. She handed him a dollar and patted him on the back. "I'll pray for your mother," she said.

"Dank you." He had no religious belief to speak of, but he appreciated the kindness.

Joyce was waiting when he came back in. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. Fine."

She didn't believe him, but she let it drop. They rode in silence on the way home, and he laid down and pretended to take a nap until it was time for his night job. He hadn't slept well since he'd learned about the accident on Tuesday, and what little sleep he got was interrupted by nightmares of burning flesh. So he was surprised the next morning to wake up to the sound of spoons against bowls. The sunlight was already streaming through the living room window. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, feeling something like he used to as a young man when a friend would have him over to drink. How long had it been? It was at least two lifetimes ago. He laid back down and wondered if he could say he was sick.

Joyce knocked on the wall at the entrance to the living room. He didn't really have any privacy, but she did this to show some respect for his space. She handed him a cup of black coffee. "Time to get ready," she said.

"But it's Sunday. It is Sunday?" He wasn't so far gone to forget their day off.

"Yes. Remember the picnic?"

"Maybe I stay-"

"No." Joyce made it clear she wasn't going to entertain any arguments. He sighed and got up to get dressed.

The drive took them past the industrial parts of Buffalo, past an island suburb and over the river. He would have enjoyed the drive, any other day, but now the idea of faking enthusiasm for a waterfall felt unbearable. They stopped the car near a park and everyone grabbed food and blankets and trekked until Joyce found a suitable spot under some trees. They ate their sandwiches and chips, and then packed up and joined a crowd standing near a ledge. Alexei thought it was starting to rain, then he saw the rainbow hanging in midair over the water. It sent up so much spray that it seemed to create a permanent cloud. It was beautiful, one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen.

"Mom, can we go across?" Will asked.

Joyce glanced over at Alexei. "If your brother wants to take you."

"Sure," Jonathan said.

"All right, be back before we need to get dinner."

The kids hustled off. "Vere are dey going?" Alexei asked.

"Canada."

"Canada?" Joyce pointed across the falls. "Dat is Canada?" She nodded. "Dat is anudder country?" Where were the soldiers? Were the children truly going to go another country and come back between lunch and dinner? On a lark? He shook his head and started to walk away, suddenly wanting to be very far from this beautiful place.

"Alexei," Joyce grabbed his shoulder. "Talk to me." He shook his head and tried to put on his mask, but the tears were welling up. He needed to get away, but she wouldn't let him. She led him to a bench away from the people taking photos.

"I overheard about your mother," she said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Not your problem." He hadn't wanted to cry in front of her, but there was no way to tell her that. He looked away, so she wouldn't see.

"We're friends, aren't we?" She turned his face toward her and wiped away a tear he hadn't managed to hold back. "I can't fix it, but I can be here." She pulled him into a hug, and the dam broke. He cried in her hair until he'd run out of tears. "Tell me about your mother," she said.

"She took care of us," he said, which wasn't an adequate description, but he didn't know the English words that would be. "I studied science for her. Make her-" He couldn't remember the word.

"Proud? I know she is proud. You're a good man."

He half-laughed and wiped his eyes. He hardly felt like a man. If his father could see him, there'd be no end to the mockery. A grown man who needed a woman to hold him while he cried. "I am sorry."

"Don't be. We all have feelings. It's what makes us human." He nodded, though he still wished he could crawl in a hole for a while. "Is there any way you can find out about her?"

"Not a safe way."

"What do you mean?"

He'd given the matter some thought. His mother had some professional acquaintances outside Pripjat who might know something. He could write to one of them. The police would read any letter from the United States, but perhaps he could use an assumed name, pretend to be an American physicist who had encountered her work and was curious about her fate. Would they believe it? He didn't know. Using the address he shared with Joyce was out of the question. Perhaps he could set up a post office box, but it still wasn't guaranteed to be safe. The police might still find him, and while they probably wouldn't harm Joyce or the children to get at him, he couldn't guarantee it. To an American, it must all have sounded paranoid, and perhaps it was, but he was accustomed to the idea that an informer might lurk around every corner.

Joyce thought for a moment. "Does your mother know where you are?"

"No. I couldn't tell anyding."

"Does she know you're safe?"

"Dey may have said I died. Dey may not said anyding. I don't know."

"She doesn't know you're alive?"

"Maybe."

"Then you should write to her."

"Sure?"

"When Will disappeared, I would have risked anything to know if he was safe. The same if I ever lost Jonathan." She took his hand. "We'll be careful. But I'd want someone to take that little risk for me."

He took a breath. "We plan. Talk about it. Yes?"

"Yes."

He smiled and touched her face, gently. She was a good woman. He could live five lifetimes and never do anything to deserve the luck that had brought her into his life.

16. Chapter 16

Chapter 16

Pripyat, Ukrainian SSR, Soviet Union

July 4, 1986

Mariya Medvedeva crossed another day off the calendar. It was now more than four years since she'd had even a word from Alyosha. Andryusha had started to hint, none too subtly, that she should stop waiting. Which meant he was dead, probably in an accident the authorities didn't want to acknowledge. She suspected Vladislav knew something about it, but he shouted every time she asked about her son, and broke things if she wouldn't drop the subject. It had been a long time since he'd last struck her, but he'd threatened to beat her until she couldn't stand if she mentioned their second son one more time. But even though she knew it was hopeless, she wouldn't stop waiting until she heard him confirm it.

The days had become unbearably long. Most of the city had been evacuated, so only the workers of the remaining reactors and the clean-up crew were left. Soon, they would receive apartments in a new settlement and come back only for work. Mariya was close to retirement age, and she was eager to leave Pripyat behind. Still, she sometimes wondered: what if Alyosha came back someday, and they had moved on? Would he find them? Of course he could go to the registry office in Kiev and wait in line to find their address, but her heart clenched at the idea of him coming home to an abandoned apartment. But there was no good in thinking about it.

She had just started to make herself a glass of tea when someone knocked at the door. Vladislav was asleep in his chair. She answered the door, but kept the chain on.

Three men in police uniforms were on the other side. "*Comrade Mariya Medvedeva?*"

Her knees shook. She hadn't even been at the plant when the accident happened, but she'd still been expecting arrest for some time. "Yes,

that's me."

"We need to ask you some questions."

She let them into the sitting room. Vladislav snorted, then startled awake. *"What's this about?"*

The leader saluted. *"Comrade, we need to ask your wife some questions about foreign contacts."*

"Foreign contacts?" Mariya racked her brain. She had never been abroad, and she didn't recall meeting any foreigners, other than those who came on carefully supervised tours. The organizers liked to have her answer a few questions, to display the Soviet commitment to gender equality. *"I don't know what you mean."*

"Do you know a Professor Bob Murphy, who teaches physics in the American state of New York?"

"I've never heard that name. Bob Murphy – I don't think I've even read that name."

"He says he met you at a conference in London."

"That's impossible. I've never left the country. You can check the records."

"We did. Which makes us wonder why Professor Murphy would make up a lie to try to get your address."

"Perhaps he met a different Medvedeva?"

"No. He included your given name, patronymic, family name and address. He said he was an admirer of your work and wanted to know if you had been hurt in the – accident. And he sent it to an old colleague of yours in Obninsk."

How many people in the USSR knew she worked at Chernobyl, let alone professors abroad? Suddenly an idea struck her, but she couldn't let herself think it. *"May I see the letter?"*

The officer shrugged and handed it to her. It was badly written – almost too obviously bad – like someone had used a dictionary to

translate word by word from English to Russian. But she recognized the shape of the letters. She'd read over enough of her sons' essays to recognize their similar, but still distinct, styles anywhere. She set her face into a mask. *"None of this looks familiar, comrade."*

"You're quite sure?"

"It is a mystery."

The man looked to Vladislav. *"Perhaps it will make sense to you."*

Vladislav examined it. He'd never paid much attention to the boys' school work. Perhaps the officers would believe him. *"It would save time if you told us what you were looking for."*

"Your son went missing on an assignment in the United States over a year ago. We believe he's defected."

"And you think he's working with this Murphy?" Vladislav asked.

"We think Murphy is a pseudonym. The only return address is a post office box."

"That's impossible," Mariya said.

"Maybe. But we want you to write back."

"Why? What should I say?"

"It doesn't matter. We just need to see who comes to pick up the letter."

"No." Mariya shook her head. *"This is ridiculous."*

"We're sending a letter from your address either way. You can cooperate, and write something, or we can continue this discussion elsewhere. And you might think of your other son's career. One enemy in the family is enough, don't you think?"

"Alyosha isn't an enemy! If he did leave, he must not have had a choice. Or he – he had a good reason."

Vladislav turned to her. *"And you wonder why he's gone bad? You*

spoiled that boy until you turned him into a lapdog. No wonder he'd bend over for the Americans."

"You can sort out who ruined your son later," the officer cut in. "Right now, we just need that letter."

Hawkins, Indiana

Alexei and Joyce had both taken a few days off work to take the children back to Hawkins for a vacation. This was the subject of great anticipation and nearly unbearable anxiety for him. The kids would stay with their friends, but he and Joyce would be at a motel. They would have separate beds, and perhaps it wasn't much more intimate than sleeping on her couch – but of course it was. He wondered if he snored. No one had ever complained, but everyone he'd shared space with was used to close quarters and sleeping through other people's noises. And what if he smelled? Jonathan had delicately explained the American devotion to antiperspirant, so he shouldn't sweat too much, but he couldn't control any other odors in his sleep.

It had been both thrilling and frightening to check in, as if the man at the desk was going to realize there was no way they belonged in the same room. But he'd just given them two keys and said the ice machine was at the end of the hall. Why would they need ice? The room had air conditioning. It didn't matter. He'd need all his concentration for important matters.

Joyce had caught up with a few friends during the day while he luxuriated in the cold air and worked on his English. Perhaps he should have written Professor Murphy's letter in English, but he wasn't confident he could pull it off, and he didn't want Joyce any more involved than she had to be. He'd set up to be notified if he received any mail, and resolved to wait. It would be months, if not years, before he got a response, if one ever came. There was nothing he could do but live his life. But Joyce was helping. She had suggested he come along, so he wouldn't be alone with his worries while she took the children back to Indiana.

She came back in the early evening and suggested they could go to the fair, since his last visit had been cut short. The corrupt mayor was gone, but people had liked his party enough that they decided to

make it an annual event. He wasn't sure how much Joyce cared for fair food and rides, but he appreciated her willingness to do something he liked.

Until they pulled into the parking lot and he felt his chest tightening. He didn't want to ask Joyce to turn back, since they'd come for him, though, so he put on a smile and went in.

He found himself scanning the crowd for – what? Grigori was dead, and the others had long since moved on. The lights, the smells, everything seemed too intense. Then he heard the bursting noise he'd heard a year before. He pulled Joyce between the booths and wrapped his body around her. She yelped, then went quiet as the loud pops continued. "It's just the balloon darts," she said. He didn't understand – he understood each of the words, but together they made no sense – so she rubbed his back until he stopped shaking. Then she pointed to the booth where he'd won the cartoon bird a year earlier. He blushed. "It does sound like a gunshot," she said. "I have things I can't stand either, from when we had to get that thing out of Will."

He nodded. "Maybe – we go somewhere else?"

"Good idea. I never liked these things."

They stopped to pick up a pizza and ate it in the hotel room, on their respective beds, while Joyce turned on "Cheers." Alexei didn't understand most of the jokes, but he laughed along with the audience on the tape. It was helpful to tell people when there had been a joke, though he wasn't sure why the Americans needed to be told. It was a funny program, but Joyce looked like she was watching a funeral. Alexei moved over to her bed and sat next to her. "Vy sad?"

She half-smiled. "I'm okay."

She'd never let him off that easily. "Vy sad?"

She sighed and turned off the TV. "I used to watch this show with someone special."

"Hopper?"

"No. He died before I met you."

"The man Bob?" Will had told him something about the drawing of the flying man on the refrigerator, though he hadn't fully understood what demodogs were.

"You know about him?"

"Will said he protected you. And him."

"He did. Sometimes when I sleep, I still see that thing over him – you understand, don't you?"

He nodded and put an arm around her. She leaned in on his shoulder. It was not the moment to try anything else, though he did brush a little kiss on her forehead. "Good man," he said. Joyce nodded. After a while, he felt her breathing deepen. His arm was starting to ache and there was no way he was going to sleep in this position, but there was also no way he was going to move. There would be plenty of other nights for sleep.

17. Chapter 17

Chapter 17

October 1986

Buffalo, New York

Alexei glanced behind him as he approached the post office near the university. He'd received a phone call that he finally had mail, and he couldn't shake the feeling that someone might be watching him. They'd managed to sneak close to a hundred Russians into Hawkins. How difficult would it be to place one assassin in Buffalo? He hurried in. Whatever happened, he wasn't going to turn back without reading that letter.

He pulled out the key he'd gotten months before and opened the letter box. Inside was a tiny envelope. His heart caught in his throat as he saw the return address. Mariya Medvedeva, from Pripyat. Why was she still there? He tore the envelope open and pulled out a small, one-sided note. *"My dearest Alyosha, you can't imagine the joy it brings me to know you are alive, but you must never take such a risk again. Your father, brother and I are fine. Take care, and be well and happy. Your loving Mama."*

He quickly folded the note and put it in his shirt pocket. If it had come to his mother, the police had seen it. Had they believed the ruse with Professor Murphy? Not likely, but his mother must have believed it was safe to send this little note. She would be in a better position to know than he.

Still, he found himself looking around him as he left the post office, and as he came and went from work and home. He told Joyce that his mother was safe, but didn't show her the note. It was ridiculous – she couldn't have read it – but it made him feel he was doing something to protect her. The less she knew, the better.

A week passed, then two, and nothing happened. Slowly, very slowly, he began to relax. He still jumped whenever anyone got too close, but he stopped scanning the faces of strangers as closely. He even

whistled a bit as he walked home from the bus stop after his night job. He was fumbling for his keys when he felt something cold on the back of his neck.

"Put your hands up," a man growled. Alexei lifted them.

"Let me explain your situation, Dr. Medvedev," a woman said behind him. *"We have orders to take you alive. Try to run, and we'll go upstairs and have a little fun with the woman and kids. You don't want that, do you?"*

Alexei sighed. *"I will cooperate."*

They led him to a dark car. The woman sat with him in the back, her gun trained on his belly, while the man drove.

"Did you arrest my mother too?" he asked.

"You don't get to ask questions," the man snarled, but the woman shrugged.

"Your mama helped us catch you," she said.

Alexei doubted that, but he didn't intend to argue. *"And now that you have me, you'll leave the Americans alone?"*

"No need to attract attention," the woman said. *"Now shut up. We have a long trip."*

They took him to a small airport outside the city and loaded him onto a private plane. It clearly wasn't set up for comfort – probably an old military transport plane. He strapped in, while the two agents went to the front with the pilot. He could overhear the woman talking to the air traffic control tower, and she spoke flawless English. Quite an asset to the police, he thought. And then they lifted off. He tried to look out the tiny window, to spot the house that had become his home before he left it forever, but everything looked alike in the dark. *"Goodbye, Joyce,"* he thought. *"Goodbye, children. Be good."*

They were flying west, because the horizon in front of them wasn't getting any lighter. Most likely they were going to Siberia. They hadn't taken his watch, so he could calculate approximately how long

they had been flying and come up with some idea of where he was. But why? No one was coming for him. They would interrogate him until either he broke or they killed him.

He decided he would tell them the truth about why he had decided to help the Americans. He couldn't come up with a better lie, and the truth wouldn't hurt anyone. It would be better to get it over, without them beating it out of him. The problem would be if they wanted him to build another key. He could do it. He remembered how. But he couldn't do that to Joyce and her family. He'd put them in enough danger already. He would have to resist to the point of death, and he could only guess how long these people could prolong suffering before letting a prisoner slip into oblivion. He could only hope that his body was weaker than they'd counted on. His mother had told him that he'd had a slight heart murmur as a child, though the tiny hole seemed to have closed by the time he reached adulthood. Maybe it had done some silent damage and the organ would fail under their torture? If only he were so lucky.

They landed at a military complex. He checked his watch. Twelve hours. Probably eastern Siberia. He unhooked himself and followed the woman.

In the daylight, he could see that she was quite beautiful, with auburn hair and striking blue eyes. Probably also trained in seducing secrets out of foreigners. The man who'd held the gun to his neck was a thick lump of muscle, like a curly-haired, less-graceful version of Grigori. He didn't want to know what either could do to him.

They led him into a room in a cement-block building and told him to sit at a desk. Another chair sat across from him, largely in the shadows of the single bare lightbulb hanging over his head. He sat and waited. They kept him there for quite a while, probably to let his nerves do their work. He closed his eyes, leaned his head back and began mentally reciting the periodic table. A guard banged on the door and said he wasn't allowed to sleep. As if he could sleep at that moment.

Then the door opened and a man walked through. The man sat down across the desk, and Alexei looked into his own narrow brown eyes. Andryusha. Relief flooded him, then fear took over. Andrei worked

for the police. He would need to prove his loyalty by being at least as brutal as the others. A stenographer quietly sat off to the side.

"Why did you betray your Motherland?" Andrei started.

"It wasn't something I planned."

Andrei slapped him. *"We're not interested in excuses. Confess, you piece of shit."*

"The Americans kidnapped me." Alexei told them about how Grigori had taken him and Smirnov to the farmhouse basement, the gun battle, how Hopper had handcuffed him and driven off with him, then stolen a car to take him to his Russian-speaking friend. "The police man threw me out because I wasn't cooperating. He knew Grigori would kill me if I went back. He wouldn't believe I hadn't betrayed them."

"And you expect me to believe it?"

"It's true."

Andrei grabbed Alexei's head and banged it against the desk. *"Stop lying!"*

"I'm not lying. I'm not lying." Alexei moaned as his vision swam.

"You told them how to blow up the key!"

"Only after they told me about the monster!"

"Monster?" Andrei sat down again, with a calculated casual air. "What monster, little brother?"

"Something with a body like a man, but gray skin, and it can walk on four legs. Better than a person can. Its head – I've never seen it, but they told me where a face should be, there are four flaps. They open up into a mouth."

"That sounds terrifying. Where are the eyes?"

"I don't think it has any. They said it finds food by smell."

Andrei shook his head. *"And what does this have to do with the key?"*

"The monster was on the other side of the door. It eats children. We wouldn't have even tried if we'd known the Americans found that, Andrei, you know-"

Andrei twisted his arm behind his back. *"You don't call me by my name. And you don't decide what we won't do. You understand?"*

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Good." Andrei released his arm and sat down again. *"Now, only one more thing before we're done with you. You're going to build a new key."* Alexei breathed deeply. *"Did you not hear me?"*

"I heard you. But I won't do it. You don't believe me about the monster. But I'm not bringing that into the world."

"You will." Andrei reached for him. Alexei flinched away and curled into himself. Andrei smiled. *"Do you really think you're going to resist? Please, Alyosha, I know you. You couldn't keep quiet when Papa got out his belt. And you think you're going to withstand everything we can do to you?"*

"I have to."

Andrei snorted. *"You'll break soon enough."* He opened the door and spoke to the guard. *"Take prisoner T1006 to his cell. Start the waking death protocol."* He turned back to Alexei. *"I'll see you in three days."*

The guard led him past a row of identical metal doors. They hadn't bothered to heat the corridor, or probably the rooms. The odor of old excrement and unwashed bodies came from several cells. Soon, he would smell like that too. He pushed the thought away.

The guard opened the door, pushed him in and shut it. It was completely bare, except for the lightbulb. Cement block floors, walls and ceiling. He wandered around a bit, trying to decide if any part was better than another for lying down. It was all the same. He chose the far wall and was starting to lie down when the guard banged on the door. *"No sleeping,"* he said.

Alexei sat down and leaned against the wall. Every time his head started to drift to the side, though, the guard banged on the door and shouted filth at him. It continued with the guard on the next shift, and the next. So this was the waking death protocol. Keep him awake until he cracked. It was simple, and easy for them, and it likely would work. From what he'd heard, a person would lose touch with reality after 72 hours awake. It might work even faster on him. It had been 24 hours since he'd been plucked out of Buffalo, according to his watch, and he already could have sworn he'd heard Hopper yelling. He was in trouble.

18. Chapter 18

Author's note: The second half of this gets intense. I tried to capture the horror of sleep-deprivation torture, but to not go over the top. If you're a bit squeamish, skip over it.

Chapter 18

July 4, 1985

Research facility, Kamchatka, Soviet Union

Stepanov was never a man to bet it all on one hand of poker. Medvedev and Fyodorov didn't know it, but while they were trying to break through the barrier in Hawkins, he had another team still working closer to home. They had said they were ready for another test, this time with more power than Medvedev had been willing to muster. The previous accident had wrecked the doctor's nerves, and while he might still prove useful, Stepanov suspected he would end up needing to get rid of Medvedev before this was over.

The team assembled and the physicists – he couldn't remember their names – turned their keys. The machine roared to life and directed a beam of blue light at the wall. It was bigger, stronger than whatever Medvedev and the other one had produced. Instead of just slowly cracking apart, the wall blew open as if they'd shot a cannon at it. But it snapped back almost as quickly, shooting energy all over the room. Screams echoed as the technicians burned. Stepanov wished for a moment that he had Grigori with him, to strangle the two fools who called themselves scientists, but they would meet their end soon enough. He went down to check the barrier.

He was going to step over the soldier at his feet, until the man groaned and moved. One of the scientists helped him up. "Where the hell am I?" the man asked. The scientists stared at each other, and then back at the man, and then again at each other.

"Find out who this is," Stepanov ordered, and turned to see a gray shape rising before him. "And what the hell is that?"

October 1986

Kamchatka, Soviet Union

For most of the first two days, Alexei could remember a few things that kept him grounded. He was in a prison in Siberia. He was being tortured. He mustn't give them what they wanted. But gradually, the third thing became less certain, and the first two no longer seemed to be useful information. He couldn't see clearly, and the light on the wall seemed to come from everywhere, but also nowhere. He heard someone screaming – a prisoner. But then it wasn't a prisoner anymore. It was a child, a very small child. Where? He felt along the floor of his cell. And there it was, right at the edge of his fingertips, swaddled like a tiny mummy, with just the head peeping out. He reached to pick it up, then pulled back.

It was terribly deformed, with no nose, one eye almost in its cheek and the other in its forehead, and a gaping black mouth with no lips. Such a thing couldn't be alive. He scuttled back like a crab. Then he saw the woman. She was wrapped in white – a shroud. She was dead too.

"Is it yours?" he asked.

"It is yours, doctor," she said. *"See your good work?"*

His? He crawled over to it again. It was still crying. He put it on his chest, like a real baby. He looked at it and saw his hand turning gray and withering, like a dead man's. He threw the child to the floor and screamed. Then a man in green came in and yelled something he couldn't understand, and beat him.

Two dead men came and dragged him down away. He could see burned, blackened hands reaching out from the cells to grab him. He tried to fight the men holding him, but his arms and legs wouldn't obey. *"I'm still alive!"* he screamed, but the men wouldn't listen. They threw him into a room. He curled up in the corner and whimpered.

And then the other him came in. The other man in his skin said something. He didn't understand. Why couldn't he go home? The other man looked at the dead woman. She pulled out a needle. He

screamed and tried to wriggle away, but she plunged it into his neck. Then everything went black.

19. Chapter 19

Chapter 19

October 1986-March 1987

Kamchatka, Soviet Union

Every part of Alexei's head hurt, including the hair follicles. How much had he had to drink? He sat up and touched the cold floor, then looked around. This wasn't his room. Everything was cement. He groaned as he remembered where he was and buried his aching head in his hands. He didn't look up even as he heard the door grating open.

"Are we awake?" The female agent sounded vaguely amused.

"What happened? What did I say?"

"A lot of gibberish about dead people. Remember that?" He had a vague sense of having had a nightmare, but it felt far off. He shook his head. *"Would you like me to refresh your memory?"*

"Not necessary."

"So we agree." She crossed her arms. *"This isn't complicated, doctor. You build what we need and you get out of here. Refuse, and we keep going until you break down. And you broke faster than anyone expected. Do you really want to go through that again?"*

"I can't do it."

She smiled. *"We have faith in you."*

"No, I can't put them in danger again."

"Who?" He shook his head. *"Your little girlfriend and her kids?"*

"I don't have a girlfriend."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised." She sighed. *"Think it over. Next time, it*

won't be me coming to talk to you, and I can guarantee Mikhail's not such good company."

"I understand." He was shaking, and not just from the cold, but he tried to keep his voice steady. *"Thank you."*

"Idiot." She shook her head and left him alone.

Alexei curled up into a ball to try to keep himself warm. What would they do to him next? No, he couldn't think of that. They'd want him to start torturing himself in his mind, to make their job easier. Something else. The periodic table. He closed his eyes. Hydrogen, helium, lithium, beryllium-

Someone was yelling. Not screaming, like he was being tortured. Yelling, indignant at the nerve of these people. He listened. The voice sounded familiar. "You think you're so tough now, Smirnoff-"

Alexei startled. That wasn't possible. But apparently there was a monster that kidnapped children on the other side of a door between worlds, so what did impossible mean anymore? He waited until he heard the door slam and the guards' heavy footsteps fade away. The man was still yelling. It was coming from his left. He put his ear to the wall. The American was in the next cell. Could it be? He debated how to communicate. He knew Morse code for the Cyrillic alphabet, but not for the English letters, and there was no guarantee the American knew the code even if he had. There were 26 letters in the English alphabet. It would be a lot of knocking, but the man might get it. He would save speaking for a last resort. He didn't want to bring the guards back. He counted the letters while the man exhausted himself yelling. W-23. H-8. O-15.

When the man finally quieted down, he started tapping on the wall, with a space between letters. "Who are you?" No response. He tried again, with longer pauses between words. "Who are you?" Nothing. He gave it another try.

"God, would you knock it off?" the man finally exploded.

Alexei sighed. Of course he couldn't be bothered to break even a simple code. "Hopper?"

"What?"

"Keep your voice down. You want de guards to hear?"

"What's it matter?"

"Dey vill beat us both and put us in different cells." Didn't Hopper understand anything? "Are you okay?"

"What's it to you? Who are you?"

"Alexei. Remember?"

"Nice try, Smirnoff."

"Try?"

"What's this, good cop-bad cop?"

"I do not know vat dat means." Then it clicked. "Vere you yelling at my brudder earlier?"

"Your brudder?"

"Andrei. Like me, but wid different glasses."

"So what, I'm supposed to believe you've got an identical twin?"

"Vat, no tvins in America?" He waited. "Do you dink dat man would have let you drow him around over a Slurpee?"

Hopper took a moment before answering. "So what do you want, Smirnoff?"

"Vat do dey want from you?"

"Damned if I know. They keep asking how I got here. I don't even know."

"Did dey hurt you?"

"I'll live, Smirnoff." Hopper paused. "What do they want from you?"

"Anudder key."

"You can't do that."

"I know."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Nudding I can do. Hold out until dey kill me."

"No brilliant plan to get us out of here?"

"Dis is Siberia, Hopper. Even if ve get out, ve die of cold. And ve can't get out."

"Keep thinking."

Alexei did turn it over in his mind, every day, looking for a way out, but it never added up to anything. Still, it gave him something to hold off despair, something to think about other than what fresh pain they had in store with him. When the guards would step out, sometimes he would ask Hopper questions about American culture, and about his daughter and Joyce. Usually Hopper would answer, though he bristled when Alexei asked about how he dissolved and came back together.

"What, you want to know how you blew me up?"

"I vant to know if I accidentally created a vay to beam people across the vorld."

"Don't flatter yourself, Smirnoff."

Hopper was gentler, though, after they would drag Alexei back from a session. It was clear that each of the agents had a specialty. Mikhail would beat him until he couldn't stand. Andrei used subtler tactics. Once, he forced Alexei to climb up and down the stairs, over and over, for hours. It might have gone on for hours more, if something at the back of Alexei's leg hadn't popped and brought him to the ground. Even then, Andrei made him crawl up the stairs to get back to his cell. And then the woman, who he'd learned was called Tanya, would come and try to persuade him of how silly he was, choosing so

much pain over the simple solution. She made good points, and he might have given in, if he hadn't seen the end of his suffering coming soon.

They'd been feeding him nothing but enough bread and water to keep him alive since he'd been brought there, and it was taking its toll. His gums were bleeding from lack of vitamins, and the wounds Mikhail left were taking longer and longer to heal. His legs were swelling as his body digested his muscles to keep itself alive for another day, and his skin was losing what little color it had, turning a pale gray. He couldn't endure this much longer – it was physically impossible. Sometimes, he vaguely wondered about whether there might be some sort of afterlife, or if he would simply cease to exist, like a flame someone had snuffed out. It didn't matter. Either way, there would be peace.

20. Chapter 20

Chapter 20

April 1987

Kamchatka, Russia

Stepanov was not happy, and he made no secret of it. He'd expected them to have a key nearly operational by now, not to still be trying to beat the secret out of the doctor. Mikhail was suddenly fascinated by the cracks in the floor, and Tanya was staring at her hands.

"We've gotten a lot of information out of him," Andrei said.

"Has he built you a key?"

"No."

"No, he hasn't. So you're telling me that three of my best agents couldn't crack one little scientist with nerves of glass?"

"That's the problem," Tanya said. Stepanov turned to her and raised an eyebrow. "If we just wanted him to sign a confession, or answer some simple questions, we would have gotten that in the first hour. When he breaks, he shatters. But a shattered mind can't build us a key. So we have to wait until he pulls himself together, and then he remembers he's afraid for his little girlfriend, and it starts all over again."

"We've thought about kidnapping the girlfriend and putting a gun to her head, but we'd need higher authorization for another American operation," Andrei said. "She's not one of ours, so that's above our level."

Stepanov took a deep breath. *"You're telling me this whole thing is held up because our scientist found himself some American slut?"*

"Some American slut who knows about the other world," Tanya said. "He was rambling about the monster stealing her child."

"So he knows about the monster?"

"He doesn't know we have one, but he knows it exists. We've pretended to think he's making it up," Andrei said.

"And have you used that?" Stepanov said.

"I didn't think we were allowed to feed him to it," Andrei responded.

"Not kill him, you idiot. Just – let him see it."

Andrei and Tanya glanced at each other. *"That might work," Andrei said.*

It had been a week since they'd come for him. There had been a frenzy of beating and long interrogations, and then it had stopped. Maybe they needed to impress someone with how hard they were working on him. His left hand hadn't stopped shaking since Mikhail had twisted his shoulder into places it was never meant to go. The nerves were probably damaged. Sometimes he held it still in his other hand, but now he just watched it. All they needed was his brain. It would be easier for them if he had functioning hands and eyes to do the work himself, but he could direct others even if they left him blind and incapable of using his limbs. He'd been vaguely disappointed every time he woke up for the last month, and he was starting to wonder if they would ever let him slip away.

Someone knocked on the door. Rather, Tanya knocked. She still observed little bits of decorum, unlike the others. She never waited for an answer, though – it was well-established he had no right to say no to anything. *"Last chance, doctor," she said. "Tonight we'll be taking a little trip down to the cellar, if you don't cooperate. And they only sell one-way tickets. Understand?"*

"Yes."

"Good. Think about it." She turned to go.

"Can I write a note?"

"No point. No one's going to read it."

"Just one more thing-"

"Of course. What can I do for you, dear doctor?"

He ignored the sarcasm. *"When they shoot you, what do they aim for?"*

"If they're in a good mood, the head. If they think you've been more trouble than you're worth, they shoot somewhere where you'll watch yourself bleed out. Something to consider. You've got twelve hours left to live, unless you make it worth our while to save you."

"Thank you." He waited until she shut the door before burying his head in his hands. He'd hoped to just slip away quietly. He thought he felt the pain again in the scar across his abdomen. Could he endure that again? He had no choice. They would decide how much more pain he had to suffer. He dimly realized that his whole body was shaking, and he rocked to soothe himself like a child. Twelve hours. This was the cruelest thing they'd done yet. He couldn't sit here in silence, listening to his watch ticking off his remaining minutes.

"Hopper?"

"What do you want?"

What did he want? Was there any good in telling Hopper what they were about to do? Could he give him a message – no. Hopper would probably die here too, and there was no point in letting him spend whatever remained of his life seething with jealousy. "I'm sorry about de ice."

"What?"

"De Slurpee. I just hoped dey'd come save me."

"How'd that work out for you?"

"Badly."

"Rhetorical question, Smirnoff."

"Rhetorical?"

"Yeah. Means people don't expect an answer."

"Academic question."

"Yeah, sure." Hopper paused. "What brought that up?"

"I don't know. I never said I was sorry."

"Yeah, well, I'm not worried about it. I think I made my point there." Pause. "You figure out a way to get us out of here yet, genius scientist?"

Fear hit him, and he stuffed his fist in his mouth to keep from crying when Hopper would hear. But what did it matter? What dignity did he have to preserve? He whimpered.

"Smirnoff? Alexei?"

"I-I don't know what to do. No plan."

"We'll keep working on it."

They spent much of the day cooking up increasingly absurd ideas to get out. It was pointless, entirely pointless, but the only other option was to sit in silence with his impending death. Maybe he was a coward – his father and brother would say so – but he needed to pretend, just a little longer, that there was some other way his story could end. When they ran out of ideas to toss around, he found himself hoping the route to the cellar would take him past a window. Maybe he could see just a glimmer of starlight, some last pleasant thing to hold in his mind as he died.

The last minutes ticked away. 8 p.m. The door opened. Two guards stood outside. Andrei wasn't there. Maybe that was better.

"Time to go," one said.

Alexei nodded and stood up slowly. His leg wasn't healing. He tried to stay off it as much as possible, but it seemed somehow better to walk to his execution than to be dragged to it. *"I can't go very fast,"* he said.

They walked, one on each side of him, down the hall and opened the door. Alexei looked down at the endless stairs. He couldn't put

enough weight on his injured leg to take the stairs normally. He had to take one step with his good leg, then bring the other along. *"Maybe you could save some time and just throw me down?"* he said, and then was surprised at himself. He'd never dared to talk like that to an official in his life. Well, what did it matter?

One guard put Alexei's arm over his shoulder on the injured side. They moved slowly, but surprisingly well. It was all cement, no windows, but Alexei found it surprisingly comforting to be touching another person, even if that person might well be the one to shoot him. How long had it been since anyone had touched him, other than to beat him? It was a small blessing, but it was something.

They led him into a cage-like cell and cuffed his hands to the wire that surrounded it. What was he going to do, fight back as they put the bullet through his brain? He noticed the floor was slick with blood that smelled like it was curdling. His stomach turned. They must have let a dozen prisoners bleed out in this cell. He looked at them. *"Please, can you make it quick? What good does my pain do you?"*

"That's not up to us," one of the guards said.

"I don't understand."

"You will." And the guard started to turn a wheel that lifted a small door on the opposite side of the cell. A strange, wild smell assailed Alexei's nostrils over the reek of the blood. A wolf? A bear? They were going to feed him to a bear? But then the creature stepped out, and he wished it had been a bear.

The strange, grey-skinned thing crept forward. Its hands looked almost human, but too long. He tried to wedge himself as tightly as possible against the cage, but there was nowhere to go. The thing stood up, and towered over him. He screamed. He couldn't help it, and the thing screamed back at him, its face opening in four directions. The last thing he saw was that horrible mouth closing in on him.

21. Chapter 21

Chapter 21

Alexei came to in another cell. He tried to sit up, but they had him chained down. He thought he remembered a thick goo covering his mouth – had they done that? No, that was crazy, but he remembered it – that horrible mouth over his, putting something inside him. He thought he felt something lodged in his throat and tried to cough it up, but nothing came up. Then the lights flicked off. He forced himself to breathe. A power failure. These things happened. But why was it so much colder? What was that floating in the air? Stay calm, stay calm, stay calm-

Andrei came and sat next to him. Not Andrei, him – but not?

"Who are you?" Alexei asked.

"The next stage in evolution," the creature – it couldn't be human – wearing his skin said. *"We're going to build a new world, doctor, and I've chosen you to help me."*

"I don't understand."

"It's not necessary to understand. All you have to do is allow me to borrow your hands. Your voice. We'll build it together. A world with no more-" He gestured around them. *"Well, your species has made a mess of things. No more of this pain."*

The lights came back on. Alexei closed his eyes. His body was suddenly calm. He looked over at his left hand. It was still, for the first time in at least a week. He clenched it and felt strength surging through his arm, like he'd never felt before. What was this?

Andrei, the real Andrei, opened the door. *"Are you ready to cooperate?"* he asked.

"No," Alexei thought, but his mouth answered, *"Yes."*

"Did that thing put it all in perspective?"

"Yes. I will build what you want me to build."

Andrei looked surprised. *"You'd better not change your mind again."*

"I won't. That whore was unimportant, compared to what we're doing here." Who was this? He heard his voice, but he couldn't recognize it. *"I'll need papers and pens to start with. And then a lab."* He thought he heard himself laugh. Dear God, was that him? *"We're going to build."*

22. Chapter 22

Chapter 22

April 1987

Tanya didn't trust his newfound willingness to cooperate. He didn't blame her. She couldn't know about the thing that seemed to have burrowed into his brain. It was the strangest thing he'd ever experienced, being a spectator in his own body. Sometimes he'd watch his hands, moving without his consent, and think that he must have gone mad. He had no other explanation.

But how could he be mad? Sometimes, whatever it was would set him at a task and recede into the background, because either it didn't understand physics or it wasn't interested. He could sense it, like an invisible watcher over his shoulder, but at least he could feel his hands as he moved, the aching in his head as he squinted at the page in the dim light. His mind was intact enough to do the work he needed to. He was making progress. It was so easy – he'd done it so many times before. The parts were starting to arrive, and he'd built a skeleton of the machine. He'd given them no trouble. But he still felt Tanya's eyes on him. She was smarter than his own brother, or perhaps just more attuned to those small changes in people that others could brush off. The thing had gotten into its mind to kill her, but he persuaded it to hold back. A dead agent would be worse than a suspicious one.

He nearly gave away the game, though, when the fuel arrived. He went to pick up a container, and the creature recoiled. It didn't just hold him back – it felt like it was clawing at his brain, an animal mad with fear. He stopped and looked at Mikhail, who fortunately noticed nothing. *"Do you have any prisoners you could put to work bringing this to lab? I need to keep preparing the machine."*

Mikhail grunted, but he found some prisoners, who the thing persuaded him to let stay as assistants. They looked terrified. Alexei pitied them, but the thing had made it clear that he was going nowhere near the radioactive materials. He filed that information away in his mind. It might prove useful at some point.

April 17, 1987

Buffalo, New York

Joyce had done a fair job keeping up appearances for the kids. She hadn't lied to them when Alexei had disappeared – it was possible that they were facing an entirely new danger, and they needed to know that. She'd thought about relocating them again, but Jonathan and Will had pushed back. No more running. She'd relented. Nothing more had happened, and things seemed almost normal, with Mike and Nancy visiting for their spring break.

Of course, she'd hurt more than the children. She hadn't been entirely sure of her feelings for Alexei – a close friend, certainly, though she wasn't yet prepared for anything more – but she knew he'd cared about her, deeply. Whether it was love or not, she didn't know, but one thing was inescapable: three men had gotten close to her since her marriage to Lonny had ended, and all had died violently. If it hadn't been for the kids, she might have joined a convent. But there was no risk of her putting any other boyfriends in danger. She had too many ghosts in her head. Bob was there every time she sat alone on the couch, trying to distract herself with TV; she thought of Hopper and what might have been whenever she saw couples walking together; when she picked up the paper, she imagined Alexei ruffling her hair and asking what the news said today, and the look of wonder in his eyes at just how many things Americans were allowed to read about.

She looked at her bed and sighed. She'd thought about trying to read, to distract herself until she fell asleep, but she knew it was pointless. Some nights, she needed to let her feelings out, and this was going to be one of them. She opened the bedroom window, laid down and turned out the lights. She'd gotten very good at crying quietly, and the kids would be too distracted with their own relationships to worry about her that night.

She must have fallen asleep, because she woke suddenly. Someone was in her room. "Will? El?" she whispered. Someone clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Listen carefully," a woman said. "We don't want to hurt you, or the

kids. We have an agent at each bedroom door. If you cooperate, everything will be well. If not, I give the signal and they put a bullet through each little head on its little bed. Nod if you understand." Joyce nodded. "Good. We're going to take a little trip."

The woman pushed something cold into Joyce's neck. A gun. They walked downstairs and to a van waiting in the back alley. Other men and women, dressed all in black, led each child out and piled them into the van. Then they hopped in themselves, guns still trained on their hostages.

"What is going on here?" Joyce demanded. "You can't just kidnap people in the middle of the night-"

"Bitch," one of the men said, and hit her across the mouth.

An auburn-haired woman – maybe the one in her room – said something to the man, and he sat down. "Here's what's happening, Joyce Byers. We have a job for your little boyfriend, but we need an insurance policy to make sure he does it. That's you. If he obeys and finishes the job, you go home with a story no one will believe. If he doesn't – well, you better hope he does. Now sit back and keep quiet. We've got a long trip ahead."

23. Chapter 23

Chapter 23

April 18, 1987

Kamchatka, Russia

Alexei's heart leapt when they brought in Joyce and the children, and then his stomach dropped when he remembered they must be prisoners too. The thing in his head hissed at the sight of the girl El. *"Kill her,"* it said, and he could feel his hands starting to move against his will.

"No," he thought back. *"This works better if they don't suspect anything."* The thing seemed to take a moment to consider this, then pulled his lips into what felt like a ghastly smile. *"So I see you have brought me some company,"* he said to Tanya. *"You didn't need to go all the way to America."*

"Forgive me if I doubted the sudden reawakening of your patriotism," she snapped back. *"Any disobedience, and one of them gets a bullet. The woman will be last, so you get to watch her lose her children. Understood?"*

"Perfectly."

The guards kept them in the lab while Tanya went off to sort out where they were going to keep a civilian and five children. Alexei was bursting with warnings he wanted to give them, but the thing in his head had no such desire – not to mention the fact that the guards wouldn't take kindly to them communicating in English. He worked on his machine and looked at them as little as possible, until the thing grew quiet. How fortunate that it didn't like physics. He debated what was most important to say. Could he explain the thing in his head, when he didn't even know what to call it? And what would they do with that information? There was only one piece he could give them that they could act on. He sat down at his desk, not far from them, and began tapping his left index finger while he worked. H-o-p-p-e-r-i-s-h-e-r-e. He couldn't get them out of this mess,

but if Hopper managed to get free and get hold of a guard's Kalashnikov – it would probably still end in death, but they had the right to try to break free. He didn't for a second believe that the agents would let them go once their usefulness as hostages was over.

He noticed Will watching his finger and tapped the message again, then one more for good measure. The guard yelled at him to stop fidgeting, but he was confident Will had understood.

He returned to the equations he'd been pretending to work on and started to drift into the blissful world of numbers, until he heard tapping. He listened. T-h-e-M-i-n-d-f-l-a-y-e-r-i-s-h-e-r-e. Mindflyer. The thing in his head, he supposed. Will sensed it too. Joyce had said it had him once, so perhaps it had left a mark on him. He started to think what to tap back, but the lights flickered out. He looked up. Everyone was gone. The room was completely dark, and colder, with that terrible dust floating in the air. The thing, once again in his skin, stood in front of him. "*We must build*," it said, and when Alexei came to, it was clear who was in control.

The thing forced him to stand and walk over to Joyce and the children. He tried to protest, but the thing wasn't listening to him anymore. El was sitting on the floor, her head on Mike's shoulder. He knelt down beside them. El looked at him, confused and wanting some reassurance it would be all right. Just a child. He saw his hand reach out, though he didn't feel it. It wasn't his to command, no matter how much he screamed inside. The thing pushed Mike away and closed his hands around El's neck. Her eyes went wide. She clawed at him and tried to scream, but only gasped for air. The boys tried to pull him away, but the thing easily threw them off and into the wall. He focused his entire will on relaxing his hands. He couldn't stop it, but maybe he could release the pressure just enough that the child wouldn't die –

The guards grabbed him. The thing wrestled them off too, but it had to put enough effort into getting rid of them that it had to release the pressure on El. She managed to get a hand on the side of his face. "This isn't you," she said in his head, and he agreed, but the thing didn't care. Then his mind left the present and they were all in the house in Buffalo, boiling and coloring eggs. The thing tried to pull him back, but she kept him anchored in memory. He was asking the

children what the Easter Bunny's function was, and they were trying to explain. He let go of her neck, buried his face in his hands and screamed, or at least he thought he did. Was that now, or then, or something else? Pain ripped through his head, and he blacked out.

24. Chapter 24

Chapter 24

Tanya crowded the hostages into Andrei's office. He leaned back in his chair, with his feet up on the desk, and shut his eyes. *"So you're telling me that my brother, who has never won a fight in his life – and believe me, I would know – managed to throw off three much larger men so he could strangle a child."*

"I got back just in time to hit him in the head and knock him out."

"And why was he strangling a child? He's just an overgrown kid himself."

Tanya turned to El. "Why did he attack you? What did you say?" El whimpered. Tanya sighed.

"He's flayed," Nancy said.

"Whipped? Sure, we whipped him, but that doesn't explain anything."

"No, I mean his mind is flayed. This happened before in Hawkins. The thing on the other side of that barrier you're trying to break through took control of people's minds. It wanted to kill El because she's the only one who can stop it."

Tanya translated, then turned back. "How do you know?"

"I've seen what it does to people. It makes them really strong, for a little while, but then it breaks their bodies down for fuel." Nancy shook her head. "He looked a lot like the people it took in Hawkins."

Tanya relayed the answer. Andrei scoffed. *"You expect us to believe that?"*

"There's one way to find out," Will said. "It can't stand heat. Put him in a really hot room. If he's flayed, you can force it out."

"I think we should try it," Tanya said.

"It's ridiculous," Andrei responded.

"Do you have a better explanation for how your mouse of a brother, who we've been starving for six months, suddenly found the strength to throw three of our enforcers?" She paused to let the point sink in. "There's a village not too far away with a banya. We take him there. If the Americans are lying, he just gets sweaty, and we punish them when we get back. If they're right-" She trailed off.

Andrei sighed. *"We've earned a trip to the banya anyway. We'll stop for a drink on the way back from this fool's errand. Then we'll make the Americans pay."*

Alexei woke in a cell with a splitting headache. His hands were chained behind his back, and his feet were shackled together. They'd stopped him. Had they stopped him in time?

The door opened. His brother was standing outside. *"Have you lost your mind?"* Andrei asked.

"I think so," Alexei said. *"Is she alive?"*

"Yes." The thing screamed in rage. Alexei laid his head against the wall and squeezed his eyes shut. *"Come on. We're taking a trip."*

Alexei got up and followed, with guards flanking him, and another following him. The thing was looking for escape routes and trying to decide if it could break the chains. They led him to a truck and ordered him inside. He complied, and they drove off into the dark.

They arrived in a tiny village. The guards pulled him out and pushed him into a grubby cement building. The humidity hit as soon as they opened the door, and the thing screamed. The steam baths. He tried to turn back, but the three guards held him, and he couldn't fight with his hands chained. His brother was waving his gun and yelling something about a police emergency, and the half-naked men cleared out. Then they threw him in, clothes and all, and put their shoulders into the door.

He tried to run at the door and break his way out, but they recruited all the men left to hold it. He screamed, begged for his life, threatened, anything, but they held him in. Finally, he collapsed to the floor, feeling like some evil thing was shredding his organs and

dragging them out through his skin. *"It's not my fault,"* he wailed. *"The thing did it."* But it wasn't him speaking, it was the thing, making its last desperate play for Andrei's pity. Then he vomited, and for one horrific moment he thought he'd thrown up his own stomach. Then the goo slithered away, through the grates in the floor.

He stayed where he had fallen and waited. Nothing spoke in his head. He closed his eyes. He hadn't felt this tired since he was bleeding out at the fair. Whatever might come, he had to rest. He thought he heard the door opening, but it sounded faint and distant. Someone jostled him. Four faces were hovering above him. Andrei actually looked concerned. Well, they were brothers, and in spite of everything, he didn't think Andrei wanted to be untwinned anymore than he did. *"It's gone,"* he said, and he smiled. The guards picked him up and dragged him out. He didn't have the strength to resist, or even to cooperate. He thought he heard Andrei yelling at the banya patrons that they hadn't seen anything, but he couldn't bring himself to worry about it. He slept as soon as they stuffed him in the back of the truck.

His whole body was shivering when he awoke. They were back at the prison. The guards ordered him to get out and walk, but his legs crumpled as soon as his shoes touched the snow. They dragged him in, and up the stairs to Andrei's office. Joyce and the children were sitting on the floor, talking quietly while Tanya kept an eye on them. El was with them. She was alive. It hadn't won. He felt strangely at peace, ready to fade away now that he knew that.

The guards plunked him on the floor. He slumped and his head lolled to one side. Andrei came up behind him and looked around at the Americans. Then he locked eyes with Tanya.

"We may have misjudged the situation," he said.

25. Chapter 25

Chapter 25

Everyone was talking at the same time, in their own languages, as if yelling over each other would be productive. Alexei pulled his legs and arms in, and leaned back against the wall. He was so cold, and so tired. Then he felt warmth next to him. He opened his eyes just a crack. Joyce. He looked away and wished the thing had dissolved him. "I am so sorry," he said.

"It wasn't your fault," Joyce said. She took his hand, then checked his forehead. "You're freezing. Come here." She pulled him close and tried to rub some warmth into his limbs. He didn't deserve this at all, and he felt the tears welling up.

"Hey, what are you two doing?" Andrei demanded. *"Come on."* He started to pull Joyce up, but she jerked her arm away and stood on her toes to get as close to his face as possible.

"You will not touch me, and you are not going to order us around anymore! You sent your thugs to kidnap me and the kids, you almost killed your own brother, and you've let a monster loose with no idea how to control it! So you are going to sit down, right over there-" She pointed at his desk. "And you are going to stay quiet until you figure out how to be useful! Do you understand?!"

"Do you really want that translated?" Tanya asked.

Andrei shook his head slightly, then looked at Alexei. *"Out of every woman in America, that one?"* Alexei didn't reply. *"You all right? Alyosha?"* Andrei touched him. *"Shit. Tanya, send someone to get a blanket and some soup. All right, Alyosha, you'll be better in a minute. You better be, because I have no idea what we're dealing with."*

When Alexei was wrapped up and managed to get a little broth in his throat, Andrei sat back at his desk. He sighed and leaned forward. *"One at a time. What are we dealing with? Start from the beginning."*

The Americans explained the first lab and the children. Andrei

stopped them. *"Your people experimented on kids?"*

"You torture people for a living and you're going to act like a self-righteous jackass?" Joyce responded after Tanya translated. Andrei shrugged, and motioned that they should continue.

They quickly covered the Demogorgon, the Mindflayer, how El had closed the gate and his machine had reopened it, and the final showdown with the monster made of melted people.

"All this over a little girl?"

"El's a badass," Mike offered.

Andrei struggled with the literal translation. *"A bad ass?"* Tanya shrugged. *"It doesn't matter. So what happens now?"*

"The Mindflayer is probably trying to do the same thing it did before," Nancy said. "Then it'll come for El and finish this off."

"It's not finished den," Alexei said. Everyone looked over at him. "Ven it was – inside me – it said it wanted to build. It said it was the next stage of – evolyutsiya."

"Evolution," Jonathan said.

"Getting rid of El is just the first step. It wants to rule our world too." Alexei paused. "It's going to come for me again too, to do that."

"Can't she just close the door? It worked for them last time. Or blow up your machine?"

"My machine isn't what's keeping it open," Alexei said. *"There's a crack, somewhere. But I don't think she can close it."*

"You'd better think of a way." Andrei turned to the others and pounded his desk. *"Someone in this room had better think of something."*

"We should bring in the other American too," Alexei said. *"He's not the brightest, but we need every mind we have."*

Andrei looked like he was about to argue, probably just to prove who

was in charge, but he sighed and gave the order. Alexei could hear Hopper yelling at the guards for waking him up in the middle of the night long before they opened the door. Did they never beat him, or did he just not care? The others were looking around, like they didn't dare to hope. Alexei caught Joyce's eye and nodded. "I don't know how," he said.

When the guards opened the door, it set off a wave of shouting, weeping, laughing and everything else as the Americans surrounded Hopper. Alexei stayed in his spot. He had no place there.

Then came the inevitable question of what they were all doing there, and then Hopper charged Andrei, yelling about involving his daughter. He'd been out of the cell for maybe five minutes, and he was going to get thrown back in. Alexei sighed, but he didn't get involved. Hopper was pushing and threatening. Andrei reached for his pistol and – found himself plastered against the far wall. He dropped to the floor next to Alexei and looked up in shock. *"Did that man do that?"* he asked.

"I don't think so," Alexei responded, and he looked over at El. A little trickle of blood was running toward her lip.

"I thought you said her powers didn't work."

Alexei smiled. *"Maybe she just needed her papa."*

"And you're happy about this?"

"I think this will help-"

He didn't get to finish his thought before Mikhail burst in. *"Comrade Medvedev-"* He stopped when he saw Andrei on the floor.

"Continue, Mikhail." Andrei winced and groaned a bit as he got up. Alexei might have found the reversal a bit satisfying if it had been any of his other interrogators, but his back and arm hurt too, where Andrei had fallen on them.

"Comrade, some villagers were trying to climb the fence to get in. We threatened to shoot them if they didn't go home."

"So shoot them if they don't leave."

"We did, comrade. And then – things got strange."

Alexei buried his face in his hands. Will tapped him on the shoulder.

"It's here," Will said, and Alexei knew he was right.

"I have a idea," he said. "But it's going to take all of us."

26. Chapter 26

Chapter 26

Alexei's plan wasn't necessarily a good one, but for all Hopper and Andrei's griping, neither had anything better. They split into teams. Tanya was screaming at the village party chairman to evacuate his people now, to try to deprive the thing of more human fuel, and was scrambling for planes and cars to evacuate anyone still alive in the prison by the time this was over. Andrei was mobilizing the guards to form a defense and even arming some of the prisoners to fight the monster he'd told them the Americans had unleashed on their Motherland. He'd promised them their freedom if they redeemed themselves by their valor. It was a cruel joke. They weren't meant to survive, just to keep the monster busy long enough to let his plan work.

The defense relied on the prison walls. It was built to survive a fire bombing, if not a nuclear blast. They'd withdrawn everyone inside and told the prisoners to kill anyone trying to leave. If they were lucky, the monster wouldn't break through. If that failed, then came the rings of prisoners with bottles of gasoline, rags and matches to try slow it down. Then, in the lowest level of the basement, the guards with their Kalashnikovs and pistols were patrolling the entrance to the lab.

Inside, Hopper and some of the guards were armed, ready to kill any demogorgons the thing sent at them once El opened the portal. Some prisoners had been assigned to Alexei's team to move the key through the portal. If all went well, he would blow it and, if not kill the Mindflyer, at least weaken it enough that it would think twice before attacking humans again. He was setting a delay mechanism, to try to give everyone a chance to get out before El closed the portal and left them to die in a small-scale nuclear blast, but he was under no illusions about surviving himself. He couldn't run on his injured leg, and he doubted Hopper or any of the guards and prisoners would risk their lives to help him.

El was testing the limits of her powers while Nancy and Jonathan were solving parts of the equations he needed checked. It was a

delicate balance, creating something unstable enough to explode, but keeping it in check long enough to get it into place, and he wasn't functioning at his best. Mike had gotten weapons from the interrogation room and was going on about how he'd use the rubber club if the thing got in. He was swinging it around, and Alexei jumped every time he heard the familiar slap.

"Please tell your friend to be quiet," he whispered to Will. "I can't – I can't."

Will didn't ask any questions. "Quit screwing around," he said to Mike. "We need to focus on barricading this place."

Whether they did or not, Alexei wasn't sure. Nancy and Jonathan brought him the calculations. Everything looked like it should work. He took a deep breath and made the last adjustments. "Ve go over de plan?"

"I open the gate when you're in position," El said.

"We carry your machine which you won't explain into this place you won't tell us about to do something we don't understand," said one of the prisoners, who must have been a particularly educated and independent-minded man. No wonder he'd been arrested. "And the guards are going to protect you from whatever is in there. I don't know that they'll extend us the same consideration."

"I wouldn't bet on it," Alexei acknowledged.

"No, I wouldn't either."

"Some of de guards and Hopper kill anyding it sends out. Joyce, you and de kids stay in de control room. You're de last line," Alexei said.

"I track what the Mindflyer is doing and try to warn everybody if I can sense a plan," Will said.

"And I close the gate," El said.

"And then we all run like hell," Hopper said.

"Dat's de plan." Alexei took a deep breath. "So is everyvone ready?"

"As ready as we're going to be," Hopper said. "And we'll figure it out when everything goes to shit after the first five minutes."

Alexei ignored the slap at his plan. It was time to go, but he wasn't going to step through that portal with anything left to say. He slapped Hopper on the back, then winced when Hopper slapped back harder. "Take care of them," he said.

"I'm so sorry," he said to El.

"It wasn't your fault," she said, and gave him an awkward hug. El had never gotten the hang of hugging. "What's he sorry for?" Hopper demanded, but no one answered.

He didn't have much to say to Mike, so he wished him luck, then hugged Nancy, Jonathan and Will. "Ve finish dis," he said to Will, who nodded.

Then came Joyce. He took a breath, then hugged her, longer than he probably should have. Hopper would have feelings about that. "I'm so sorry I put you in danger," he said. "But so happy to see you vonce more."

"Once more isn't the right word," she said. "Again."

He nodded, because if she wasn't ready to accept it, who was he to force the issue? "See you on de udder side, yes?"

"Yes."

They got into position. He gave the nod to El, who was in the control room with the others. She held out her hands and the air seemed to crackle with some form of energy he couldn't name. And the crack in the rock before them started to spread, like a wound opening.

"For the Motherland?" the dissident professor quipped.

Alexei looked back at the control room. *"For our families,"* he said. And they plunged in.

27. Chapter 27

Chapter 27

The inky sludge seeped in quietly, rising up from the sinks, the floor drains, the toilets. Andrei had to respect the thing's tactics. Why bother breaking through a concrete wall when you can just flow in through the pipes? Once he got word what it was doing, he ordered the prisoners to start blowing the plumbing. It was too late to prevent the incursion entirely, but it reduced the amount of – whatever it was – they had to deal with. In a way, he was impressed with the stand the prisoners made, and almost wished he could let them go at the end. But it didn't matter. Soon, no more reports came from the upper floors. He ordered his men to be on alert.

It slithered down the walls, instead of taking the stairs like a self-respecting monster. His hair stood on end as it started to pull itself together into something like an immense spider. The guards fired and bits of the thing splashed around, but it just reformed and threw the men like a careless child would his toy soldiers. Andrei pressed himself into a corner and debated his options. He was a good shot – he could hit it in the brain. But no. The brain was on the other side of the portal. He looked at his pistol in disgust. A lot of good this was doing.

He ducked as a man hit the wall next to him and fell with a sickening thud. "*Come on, Alyosha,*" he thought.

The door to the lab was thick, but not thick enough to drown out the monster's roars and the men's screams.

"It's taking care of our jailers," Hopper said grimly.

"Maybe I'd rather take our chances with the Russians," Joyce said.

"No, you wouldn't," Hopper retorted. "Not if you knew what they're capable of."

They were silent for a moment. "We all thought you were dead," Joyce said. "I never imagined – especially not like this-

"Yeah." Hopper took a breath. "So, um, Enzo's-

"If we make it out of here alive."

"Hey," Will said. "Sorry to interrupt, but something's going on."

"What is it, honey?" Joyce asked.

"Something's coming. I can feel it."

Hopper picked up his borrowed Kalashnikov and started to join the guards.

"Maybe you should stay here," Joyce said. "Alexei said the control room's built to survive a small explosion-

"And Alexei just knows everything, doesn't he?" Hopper retorted. "I think Smirnoff's going to need all the help he can get with these things."

"Okay, but I'm locking the door, so don't come crying!" Joyce yelled. Hopper just grunted. She smiled, in spite of herself.

The Upside Down, as the kids called it, looked much like what he had seen when the thing wanted to control him. Alexei limped behind as the prisoners carried the key in. It occurred to him that he had no earthly way of knowing how far they needed to go, but he felt a strange rising dread as they moved further. Maybe this was what Will felt.

So far, the creatures had kept their distance. Perhaps the faint radiation was enough to keep them at bay. Or perhaps he was walking into a trap.

A sudden wave of fear hit him and he bent over, half-expecting to be sick right there. *"This is the spot,"* he said. *"I'm sure."*

The prisoners set the machine down and he went to work. *"How long is this going to take?"* one of the guards asked.

"Two minutes to arm it. I can set the timer for up to fifteen. That should give us enough time to get out of here."

"*Can't you work any-*" the guard started to say, before a creature enclosed his head in its jaws. The other guards used their guns and managed to wound a few of the creatures, but it was an unequal fight, and the prisoners had no weapons. Alexei pressed himself against the machine and connected wires as quickly as he could. This was the only way to help. He flipped the last switch. It was armed.

He looked around. He was alone. Anyone the creatures hadn't killed had run off. And at least a dozen of the things were surrounding him and the machine, making their horrible clicking sounds. They didn't dare get close enough to touch him, because of the radiation, but they'd also left him no escape. In fifteen minutes, he'd be torn apart by his own creation. Well, it probably would be over with quickly.

Then suddenly, something changed. The creatures seemed to get an inaudible order, and lost all interest in him. They were headed toward the entrance. Toward the girl who would close the portal. If they killed her, the Mindflayer would recover from any blow he delivered and rule Russia, if not the world, from the portal they'd opened.

He quickly reset the dial. Five minutes. Once it exploded, those things would be in no position to attack. It was up to Hopper now, to keep them away from El for that long.

The demogorgons streamed through the portal. The guards sprayed them with bullets, but for every one they killed, three more poured in. Hopper positioned himself outside the door to the control room, shooting the ones that got close. The monsters hit the glass, over and over, but it didn't crack. Well, these Russians made something half-decent.

He caught El's eye. "Close it," he yelled. He didn't love the idea of trapping Alexei in the other world, but he was probably already dead – if he'd even lived long enough to arm the bomb. Smirnoff wasn't his responsibility, and if his comrades didn't save him, that was his bad luck.

El stretched out her hands and roared with effort, as blood started to drip from her nose. Slowly, the portal began to inch back together. Hopper turned back just in time to shoot a demogorgon inches from

his face. "Do it, kid," he thought.

Alexei limped back as fast he could. The adrenaline was coursing through him, but it hit up against the limits of his ruined leg. He half-wondered if it would be better to go back, lie next to his machine and wait for the end, but then he saw a sliver of light. It wasn't closed yet. He still had a chance. He pushed as hard as he could, and just managed to reach his hand through the rapidly closing portal.

"Please!" he screamed. "Please, don't leave me!"

Someone grabbed his hand and pulled him through. Hopper. "Know how to shoot?" Hopper asked.

"Yes."

"Good. Duck." Hopper blasted a demogorgon over his shoulder, then tossed him a gun. "Kill something."

It had been a long time since the shooting practice he'd had to do as a teenager, but it came back easily enough. He and Hopper stood back to back and fired at anything that moved.

"How long until this thing blows?" Hopper said.

"Less dan a minute."

"I can stay alive that long."

Alexei wasn't sure he could. His gun was out. When one of the creatures got close enough, he swung at its head. It barely noticed. The creature picked him up and started to open its terrible jaws – then dropped him and fell to the ground. The others also started to fall. He looked at El, then back at the portal. She'd closed it. Thank any god that might exist.

Then the earth rumbled. "Dat was it," he said to Hopper.

Hopper picked him up and let him put an arm over his shoulder. "Come on, Smirnoff, you're coming with us."

They picked their way over the bodies of the guards outside. There

was no sign of his brother. The kids started to head for the steps, but he directed them to another door. "Dey take de bodies out dis vay. It's faster," he said.

They raced through the cold to the nearby airstrip. Tanya was waiting at the hangar. "Last plane out," she said, and rushed them on.

"These conditions aren't good," the pilot complained.

"Things are about to get a hell of a lot worse here," Tanya said. *"Fly east."*

"How far?"

"Until we hit U.S. airspace."

"What?"

Tanya pulled her gun. *"I don't really feel like explaining this. Just make it easy for both of us."*

The pilot complied, and soon they were taking off into the wind. Everyone slid around the back, but no one protested. They were going home. That was all they needed to know.

28. Chapter 28

Chapter 28

April 20, 1987

Hooper Bay, Alaska

They'd been arrested as soon as they'd hit the tarmac, but Alexei was pleasantly surprised the Americans had let them live long enough to land. Soldiers had immediately separated everyone for interrogation. It wasn't every day, after all, that a plane full of people crossed the Bering Strait and demanded asylum.

They'd stuck him in a holding cell. It made sense. It was clear he was Russian – they had plenty of time to decide what to do with him. It was more urgent to know if the Americans were really their own, or a KGB trick. The cell was cold, though it didn't seem to bother the drunks who'd been thrown in with him. He tried to avoid their eyes.

"What're'ya in for?" a young man in a uniform slurred.

Alexei paused, then decided on the truth. He couldn't hide his accent. "I'm trying to defect."

"What'd'ya mean?"

Was that the wrong word? "I want to join your side."

"From Roosia?" the drunk man waved his arm in a direction that might have been west.

"Yes."

"Well hell, welcome to America!" The man slapped him on the back, and promptly started teaching him the national anthem. Alexei just wanted to sleep, but he didn't dare offend the jovial drunk who'd decided they were now best friends and played along until the man was snoring. Then he pulled his arms and legs in to try to conserve as much body heat as he could. Why was he so cold?

He studied his hand in the dim light. It looked shrunken, like an old man's, the bones and tendons shifting visibly beneath the skin. He had almost no fat left to warm him. He noticed how thin his arms were around his body. The muscles were wasted. If the Americans didn't want to be bothered with him, they could just leave him in this cell for a week or two. After a few more days, he'd be too weak to even demand food from them. They wouldn't do that – would they? Before Joyce and Hopper had kidnapped him, he would have expected it. Now, he was less sure. But then again, Joyce might have been an exception, a sheltering harbor in a hostile sea. He hoped it was going well for her and the children. It should. They were innocent, beyond a doubt. He wasn't sure that he was, anymore.

The drunks were released in the morning. Alexei could hear the guard balling them out as they left, then heard his brisk military footsteps on the concrete. He lowered his eyes, just in case, but he heard the guard stop to look at him. "You hungry?"

Alexei nodded, but didn't look up.

"You answer me when I ask you a question. Yes sir or no sir."

"Yes sir."

"All right. I'll find you something. But the captain wants to talk to you first."

So the food would be his reward. He'd intended to cooperate anyway. What other option did he have? So he walked alongside the guard down the hall, until he suddenly couldn't get his breath. It felt like he'd run a mile, rather than walked a hundred yards. He stopped and leaned into the wall.

"You shitting me?" the guard asked. Alexei shook his head and tried to answer 'No sir,' but nothing came out. The guard looked annoyed, as if he thought it must be a trick, but he detoured them to the hospital wing.

Vladivostok, Soviet Union

"And now who knows where they are," Andrei finished the tale for his

interrogators.

"You expect us to believe all that?"

"I wouldn't have believed it either. But you saw those things in the cellar. Whatever they were, they weren't human."

His main interrogator handed him a cigarette and let him light it. This was going well, then. He'd done this often enough himself to know how much such a little privilege meant. He took a drag, gauged the man sitting across from him, and spoke again. *"As I see it, we've got two worries. One, that the CIA somehow found out about our little adventure in Buffalo. Two, that he wants to try this again."*

"Who?"

"Stepanov." He hesitated, for emphasis. It was important to time this right. *"I'm a man who follows my orders. We all are, aren't we? So that's what I did. But after – that – I had to wonder: how could Stepanov have made such a mistake? And then I thought – what if it wasn't a mistake?"* That would be catnip to whoever his interrogator reported to. They'd all made their careers by finding enemies, real and imaginary, to satisfy their betters' paranoia. Aiming for a general was risky, but if they succeeded, it would mean promotions for all of them.

And someone had to take the blame for this fiasco. If Alyosha had been available, it would have been him. There was simply no way to protect his brother, when he was the most convenient scapegoat. But he was either dead or in the arms of his new protectors, and either way, there was nothing to do for him. So it was all a matter of saving his career, and the best way to do that was to give them a juicier target.

His interrogator took a drag on his own cigarette. *"What if it wasn't?"* he said.

Hooper Bay, Alaska

The authorities had quickly cleared Mike and Nancy to go home. Karen had had their fingerprints taken and put on file with the police, in case they ever disappeared. They'd agreed to tell Karen and

Ted that bad weather had kept them in Buffalo an extra day, and yes, they were sorry they hadn't called. It seemed incredible to Joyce that the whole thing had happened over a long weekend, give or take a bit. She still wasn't entirely sure what time zone she was in.

She, the boys, Hopper and El had had to stay in separate rooms until Dr. Owens came to verify that they were Americans and could be trusted. She'd let the soldiers have a piece of her mind about that.

When it was finally over, they boarded a military plane to take them to Anchorage, where Owens had arranged tickets on a civilian flight. Joyce stopped and looked back, scanning if anyone else was coming. "What are you doing with Alexei and the others?"

"The pilot asked to be sent back, and they're arranging it," Owens said. "We've got some work for Miss Tatiana Butina. The doctor's in the hospital, so we'll see when he gets out."

"In the hospital?"

"Apparently the Russians don't think they need to feed their prisoners."

"Will he be all right? Are they taking good care of him?"

"He'll be fine. I'll make sure." Owens shook his head. "You people never stop, do you? Now I'm going to have to explain why the police chief who was dead for almost two years is back. Think you could talk him into accepting a new identity?"

"Not a chance."

"Didn't think so." Owens sighed. "I guess we say he went undercover, to root out the corruption surrounding the mall. Either that or amnesia, but that sounds too much like a soap opera, doesn't it?"

"I think undercover is the best we're going to do," Joyce said.

Owens smiled. "Better get on your flight. And please, try to stay out of trouble, Joyce Byers."

Joyce took her seat next to Will, while Hopper sat with El. Jonathan

splayed out across a row and was immediately asleep. She didn't blame him at all.

"Can we go home now?" Will asked.

"It's going to be a full day of travel from Anchorage, honey," Joyce said.

"No, I mean, home. Back to Hawkins." Will sighed. "We're not really safe anywhere, Mom. I mean, the freakin' Russians broke into my bedroom in the middle of night. We might as well be with the people we know."

Joyce pulled him over to kiss his head and didn't say anything for a moment. "We'll talk about it," she finally managed to respond.

Alexei remembered sitting on a table in his clothes, then waking up in a bed, wearing a hospital gown and attached to more machines than he cared to count. He could hear American voices talking. A blond woman noticed he was awake and offered him some juice. He drank it, gratefully. "We'll start you off slow," she said.

Over the next few days, they attempted to explain the disaster area his body had become. Alexei only half-absorbed it. His system had taken a severe shock. It was important for him to take care of himself when he got out. No smoking, no drinking, plenty of rest. He understood, but he mostly wanted to know where they were going to release him. Could he go back to Buffalo, with Joyce? No one had that answer.

After about a week, when his head was beginning to clear, they sent in a man a bit older than himself. "I might have a job for you," said the man, who introduced himself as Ricci. "But let's see what Soviet physicists know first."

Ricci started with ridiculously simple questions that any high school student should have been able to answer. Alexei was tempted to point out his doctorate wasn't just a piece of paper, but it wouldn't do to offend a man who could give him a job. They progressed through higher and higher levels of theory, and then Ricci asked about his own research. Alexei explained the idea of recycling nuclear waste.

"And was that ever used for, say, removing obstacles?" So Ricci knew. Alexei sighed, and told him the rest. Ricci looked pleased as he got up to go.

"Did I get de job?" Alexei asked.

"What?"

Alexei shook his head. "Dere isn't a job, is dere?"

"There are two identical Medvedevs out there. One's a physicist, one works for the KGB. It was important to find out which we had." Alexei nodded, though he didn't bother to hide his disappointment. "That said, I think I could use a man like you, when you're out of that bed."

"Where do you want me to go?" Please not underground, please not underground, he thought.

"A little town called Hawkins, Indiana. We could use a man who knows a thing or two about portals."

29. Chapter 29

Chapter 29

Thanksgiving 1987

Hawkins, Indiana

On paper, Alexei knew he had much to be thankful for. He'd survived his time with the KGB with his mind and body more or less intact, been accepted back into the United States, offered work monitoring the old portal, and even allowed to settle near people he cared about. Joyce and her children had moved back over the summer, so he could see her from time to time. It was more than he could have hoped for. But he couldn't muster too much gratitude as he took a bite of his dry turkey sandwich and wondered how he was going to pass four days without work or anything else to do.

His mind had felt like a child's teeter-totter in the months since the Americans had released him: one day he was full of hope and wonder at his new life, and determined to make himself a part of the Americans' world; the next day he had to drag himself to work and couldn't force himself to practice English, because what did it matter? He would never belong. He hadn't had this difficulty before. Perhaps that had been a honeymoon period of sorts. Or perhaps Joyce had smoothed the difficulties in ways that he hadn't appreciated at the time.

He had seen Jonathan and Nancy fairly often over the summer. His apartment was over the newspaper office, which had hired them again because the new editor didn't share the old one's prejudices. He hadn't particularly liked summer in Hawkins – far too hot – but it had been nice to exchange pleasantries with them every day. But they had gone back to school, and he'd lost his connection to his substitute family.

Hopper had made it clear he didn't like Alexei hanging around the store where Joyce worked, and while he wasn't sure if Hopper would beat him if he found him leaning on the counters, he didn't particularly want to chance it. And it was painful, to hear Joyce

talking about some movie she and Hopper had seen, or a restaurant where they'd had dinner. Not so painful that he would have given up his one true friend, if Hopper hadn't been so insistent. But something like his leg – a nagging that never quite went away and that he'd just learned to live with.

He'd tried going to bars, since as far as he could tell those were the only places where Americans considered it socially acceptable to talk to a complete stranger. It wasn't going well. No one had thrown a drink on him, so it could have been worse, but everyone seemed to think he was either a little foreign boy who didn't know anything, or a dangerous spy. He'd visited Murray and begged for help cracking the code, but most of what Murray suggested involved packaging: different clothes, and trying to firm up the noticeable belly he'd developed.

He'd never have thought to worry about what his abdomen looked like – his body had been malnourished for months, and it was trying to protect itself from the next famine by demanding more food. Other Russians wouldn't have cared. Some might have even taken it as a sign that he was prosperous. But Americans were shallow and vain, Murray said, and so he'd done his best to hide his imperfections. Maybe that was what Americans did with all the time they didn't have to spend searching for the necessities of life. If so, it seemed like a poor trade. Maybe he'd had to search every department store in Moscow for a suitable pair of shoes, but eventually he had succeeded in finding one. Even if he put in the same time and energy, he'd never look like the men on magazine covers.

He wondered if Murray's advice was bad – the man had been single for a long time – but he had no one else to ask. He knew his coworkers were suspicious of him, so he kept silent whenever possible. He'd tried to join some of the other men for lunch on his first day and met with stony stares, so he stayed in his office as much as he could. Some days, the only person he talked to was the 7-11 clerk.

Will had come by a few times to beg for help with geometry, which Alexei had been happy to give. But that was bound to end soon too. The boy was getting the hang of proofs, and then there would be nothing to bring him back. The thought made him sadder than it

should have. He'd secretly hoped for an invitation for this feasting holiday, but it hadn't come. Maybe it wasn't only Hopper. Maybe Joyce didn't want to see him either. Foolish Alyosha. He wondered if there was something wrong with him, that everyone else could see, or infer from each other – if something had been sitting on the shelf a long time and no one queued up for it, it was junk or worse. It suddenly seemed to him an apt metaphor for a 42-year-old bachelor.

When it had become clear he'd be alone for the holiday, he'd briefly considered buying a few bottles of vodka and writing the long weekend off entirely, but he wasn't sure how much his liver could handle. And everyone at work already assumed he was a drunk. No sense in coming back hungover on Monday and proving them right.

He finished the sandwich without really tasting it and went to put on a record. He'd never lived alone in his life, and he hated the silence. He knew he should probably put on something cheerful, but he picked up the Paul Simon record the store owner had helped him find a few weeks before. The man had been friendly and talkative, even though Alexei had had to work not to wrinkle his nose at the smell of skunks in the store. He decided he would go buy another record the next day. It didn't really matter what it was – he just needed the company. For now, Paul Simon would have to do.

*"She comes back to tell me she's gone
As if I didn't know that
As if I didn't know my own bed
As if I'd never noticed
The way she brushed her hair from her forehead
And she said, 'Losing love
Is like a window in your heart
Everybody sees you're blown apart
Everybody sees the wind blow ..."*

Author's note: Sorry to write a depressed Alexei chapter, but I felt like after everything, he'd struggle to adjust back. I promise it gets better soon. By the way, the lyrics are from *Graceland*.

30. Chapter 30

Chapter 30

Black Friday 1987

Alexei woke up earlier than he'd intended from the sound of people honking at each other below. He looked down at Main Street. It was jammed with cars and people. He wasn't sure what might be going on, but he threw on his clothes and shoes. No sense in missing a good spectacle.

People were lined up outside the door of the store where Joyce worked. He got in line instinctively. If people were lined up, they were selling something good. And anyway, what else was he going to do until breakfast?

When he got inside, though, he instantly wanted to escape. Why were these people pushing so much? Whatever they were selling couldn't be that good. He plastered himself against a shelf and let the crowd surge by. Once he had enough space to breathe, he looked for Joyce. They couldn't let her work on a day like this. She was so small, these people would crush her. But there she was, on a ladder, restocking a shelf. He pushed back against the crowd until he made his way over. He grabbed the ladder and shouted up at her.

She looked down and smiled. "Alexei! How are you? You need help finding something?"

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. It's a little crazy, but that's Black Friday."

"Dis is normal?"

"For the day after Thanksgiving, you bet. But hey, it's time and a half for getting here early. I can't talk now, but come by in a few hours if you're not busy. We need to catch up." And she folded up her ladder and made her way back to the checkout line. Alexei watched, half-expecting the crowd to swallow her at any moment, but she made it

back to relative safety behind the counter. He didn't feel at all at ease with this situation, but he wasn't sure how to protect her, particularly if she didn't believe she needed to be protected. He loitered around, looking at things he didn't need, and then decided it was probably safe enough to go across the street for something to eat. He found a seat near the window, so he could keep an eye on her store while he had his pancakes and coffee, just in case. But by that point the crowd was thinning out. He finished his breakfast and let the smelly record store owner sell him "killer tracks." He'd had to explain again that he wasn't quite sure what he wanted, because Soviet censorship had so limited what he could hear.

"That's heavy, man," the record store owner said, before selling him some Warren Zevon and telling him to come back if he wanted "something to go with it." He assumed that would probably be a similar record, so he said he would listen and then decide. Then he circled back to Joyce's store.

It was nearly empty. Joyce was picking up the merchandise people had strewn about. He couldn't help grunting a little bit as he got on his knees to help her clean up, then was annoyed with himself. Did he have to sound old? But she didn't seem to notice, or more likely didn't care. What was it to her if his bones hurt?

Jonathan was settling in well at NYU, and Will was finally getting the hang of geometry. "I have you to thank for both of those," she said. He blushed and made some modest comment. "No, I really do appreciate everything you've done. If you ever need anything, just ask."

He paused and wrestled with his pride for a moment. Need won out. "I do need some help." Joyce indicated she was listening. "Do you – it's silly – do you know any women without men?"

"You want me to set you up on a date?"

"Forget it. It's silly."

"No, it's fine. I'll have to think. What are you looking for?"

"Someone intelligent-"

"That's going to be a tough order in Hawkins, finding somebody intelligent enough for a guy with a doctorate in nuclear physics."

"You're intelligent. You didn't go to college, but you say interesting dings."

"Oh, well, that's easy. If I'm intelligent enough for you, no problem finding someone. What else?"

"I like kids. Maybe someone with kids?"

"You want a ready-made family?" It sounded strange, like a factory somewhere was churning out families, but he nodded. "This is going to be so easy. There aren't a lot of guys who have steady jobs, want a woman to talk to and like kids. I know some moms who'd fight over a guy like you."

He smiled for the first time in a while. Joyce was probably exaggerating, to boost his confidence, but it still felt good not to be seen as the defective appliance left on the shelf. "Dank you so much."

"Not a problem at all. I'm glad we can catch up now, since you couldn't make it for Thanksgiving."

"Couldn't make it?"

"Hop said he ran into you and you said you were having dinner with some friends from the lab. Which is great. How was it?"

Was he supposed to lie? "I don't – it was fine. We had turkey." That was what they were supposed to eat, wasn't it? "And – potatoes?" Everyone ate potatoes, so that couldn't be wrong.

Joyce gave him a look. "I'm pretty sure you're lying, but I can't figure out why. Want to shed a little light?"

"I – maybe he misunderstood."

"You were alone for Thanksgiving?"

"It wasn't so bad."

"Nobody should be alone on Thanksgiving. Come over tonight. I have tons of leftovers. We'll have dinner. It'll be nice."

So he found himself outside the house Joyce rented, a few sad little grocery store flowers in hand. He wasn't sure what the rules were in America, but in Russia it would have been a terrible breach of etiquette to show up without flowers for the hostess. Joyce gave him a friendly hug and ushered him in. Jonathan and Nancy were off somewhere, but Will was there. He noticed the fourth plate, and hoped against hope that Will had a friend coming. But no such luck. Hopper stopped in his tracks when he saw Alexei at the table.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I invited him," Joyce said, with just a little edge in her voice.

Alexei spent most of the meal stuffing his mouth and spoke only when directly addressed. Some quiet power struggle was playing out, and knowing Joyce and Hopper, it wouldn't stay quiet long. Will got up to go as soon as he finished eating and shot Alexei a sympathetic look.

After he'd eaten all the food Joyce had heaped on his plate – so much for losing weight – Alexei excused himself as quickly as he could. He didn't relish going home to his empty apartment, but he didn't want to be around when the tension exploded. Hopper walked him to the door, stepped outside and pushed him up against the side of the house.

"You just can't stay away, can you, Smirnoff?" he said.

"She invited me."

"Yeah, and you played the pathetic little bachelor to guilt her into it."

"If you wanted me to lie about having a Thanksgiving dinner, you should have told me."

"You just can't stand that you lost-"

"I can't stand? You von. I know dat. But you couldn't just vin. You had to take away my friend. I vent over today to ask her to help me

find someone. Because she loves you, not me. So vy are you so jealous?" He pecked Hopper on the cheek. Hopper let go of him, in shock. "Dat's all I ever got from her. Happy?"

The screen door swayed. Joyce was standing outside. How much had she heard? He didn't really want to know. "Excuse me," he said. "Joyce. Hopper."

He ran until his legs and lungs burned, then walked the rest of the way home. When he got in, he threw off his clothes and jumped in the shower. It was silly, since he lived alone, but the old habit of running water when he needed to cry or shout died hard.

He got his emotions out, made a half-hearted attempt to dry his hair and wrapped the towel around his waist. He wasn't anywhere close to sleepy. It was going to be a long night. Maybe he'd make some tea and try to relax. He had just put the water on when someone knocked at the door.

31. Chapter 31

Author's note: There will be adult situations in this chapter. Nothing real graphic, but a little more than you'd find in the show. You've been warned.

Chapter 31

He didn't take the chain off the door, but opened it up just enough to see who was on the other side. Joyce. He started to open the door, remembered he only had on a towel and quickly excused himself to get dressed. He pulled on the clothes he had left on the floor and was about to let her in when he remembered the socks he'd left drying on the radiator. He didn't want her thinking he lived like an animal, so he tossed them in the bedroom he never used before opening the door.

"Is someding wrong?" he said.

"I just wanted to apologize," she said, and handed him a Slurpee. He took a sip. Strawberry. He wasn't going to complain. She took a sip of hers, then shook her head. "This one's yours." They switched, and he tried it. Cherry.

"Would you like to sit down?" He gestured toward his couch. "But you don't need to apologize. You didn't do anyding wrong."

She sat at one end. He sat at the other. She took a minute to speak. "I'm sorry Hopper treated you like that. I didn't think he would do that, or I wouldn't have had you both over."

It was entirely predictable, but he wasn't going to say that. He shrugged. "Not big." Then a thought struck him. "Does Hopper know you're here?"

"I don't care if he knows or not," Joyce said. Alexei thought that he cared very much, but he kept quiet. "We had a screaming match before I came over here."

"Did you vin?"

"I told him I didn't want to see him anymore. I don't know if that's a win." She sighed. "When he came back, I needed to know if there was anything there. I guess I know now."

"He will realize he was stupid and come back," Alexei said. Hopper was a hard-headed man, but he couldn't imagine any man being stubborn enough to give up Joyce rather than admit he'd been wrong. He would be back on her doorstep with flowers and candy by now – but he also would never have screamed at her in the first place.

Joyce shook her head. "I think it's for the best. Hop and I bring out the worst in each other. I think we'd kill each other if we ever tried to live together."

What was he supposed to say? That he was sorry? He wasn't, not really. He didn't like seeing Joyce hurt, but watching her happiness come from Hopper had pained him. He tried to think of what he would say to the men he'd shared an apartment with when their relationships turned sour. "Do you want some vodka?"

"No thanks."

No, of course she didn't want vodka. "A hug?"

"Maybe we should just talk first." She took a deep breath. "Hop can be an idiot, sometimes, but sometimes he's right about things. And after he left and I thought about it, I realized he made one good point." Alexei nodded that she should continue. "You and I never really resolved anything."

"Resolved?"

"Never settled it."

"What do we need to settle?"

"We never really talked about our feelings." She paused. "That was at least half my fault. After you and Hop came back, it was just easier not to try to sort out what those feelings were. It was easier to tell myself we were just friends. And you acted like a good friend and didn't push me. So I just told myself I'd imagined it, and you didn't feel anything for me. Then I heard you and Hop, and I had to face

how unfair that was." She looked at him intently. It was strangely like being interrogated. He looked away. "So I guess that's what I really need to apologize for."

Then she was silent. She was waiting. What was he supposed to say? He couldn't deny it, now that she'd dragged those feelings into the open. But what good was it, spilling out just how much he felt that she would never reciprocate? He needed to say something. "You didn't imagine it. But I knew you didn't love me, so I decided I'd rather be friends than nothing." She looked shocked. He mentally kicked himself. If TV had taught him anything, it was that Americans were skittish about that word. "I didn't mean – oy – in Russian the same word means two things. Love – and – vell, it also means-

She kissed him, very lightly, on the cheek. It took him a moment to recover enough to speak. "Vas dat so I vould stop talking?"

"A little bit." She looked away. "You said you knew I didn't love you. You were right. But I wasn't ready to love anybody. It was all too much. I couldn't let myself get that close to anyone. Do you understand?" He nodded. "But now, I don't know what to think."

He nodded again, but he couldn't come up with a reply. Was he supposed to make his case? Or was that just pushy? They had lived happily together for more than a year. Did she really think that adding an element of romance would destroy everything? There was no reason to believe it would, but also no way of proving it wouldn't, except to try it – which was what she was afraid to do.

"Say something," she said.

What did she want him to say? What was the problem? Then it hit him: of course, of course. Why had it taken so long for him to see it? "Ve make good friends and roommates, yes?" She nodded. "And a boyfriend is a friend you vant to-" he fumbled for an inoffensive word, "kiss. Yes?" She smiled a bit, but nodded to play along. "So de qvestion is, do you vant to kiss me? But I cannot answer dat qvestion for you."

"It's not so simple. After so long just being friends-" She trailed off.

"Den I don't know." He sighed. "You have to decide if you want to try."

"Try what? Kissing?" She shook her head.

"I vill always be your friend. De rest is up to you."

They sat for a moment. Alexei sipped his Slurpee, which had mostly melted. It was something to do with his hands, and an excuse not to talk. He set it down and sighed. He could feel Joyce looking at him, but he wasn't sure he wanted to look back. Of course she didn't want to kiss him. That was what this was really about – coming up with some way to acknowledge his feelings, and how futile they were. He leaned forward and laid his face in his hands. Then he felt her hand on his back. He sat up and turned to her. Might as well get this over with.

She touched the side of his face and leaned in. He leaned in too, though not enough to close the gap. That was her right. She touched her lips to his very softly, tentatively. It wasn't much of a kiss, but it still sent warmth flooding through him. He waited a beat, then touched their lips again. Then he waited. Yes? No? Maybe? She leaned in again, and opened her lips ever so slightly. Now this was kissing. She tasted like a strange combination of cigarettes and strawberries, but he wasn't going to complain.

"Cherry," she said, and laughed. He laughed too. Anything to cut the tension. And they kissed again. This time her hands found their way to his neck, and he slipped his around her waist. Then she moved her hands forward to his face, and pulled him in for a deeper kiss. He thought about all of the places he could touch her, but decided he'd better not. He didn't dare offend her by presuming too much.

They pulled apart. "So," she said, but didn't finish the thought.

"So," he responded, because he felt he had to say something. He tried to discreetly angle one leg over the other, but she noticed and smiled. He blushed like a school boy. "So."

She looked at him like she was making a decision. More kissing? Yes? No? She took his hand. "Let's find out," she said.

"You mean-"

"Uh-huh."

There wasn't enough space on the couch. Was the bedroom clean? He never used it – sleeping on the couch somehow made him feel less alone than lying in a bed big enough for two. Had the spiders taken over? Too late to worry about that now. He kicked the wet socks under the bed, and hoped Joyce didn't notice. He sat down on the bed and patted the spot next to him. She sat down too. It occurred to him that he had no idea what American women expected. The mechanics would be the same, but was he supposed to say something first? Which articles of clothing was it appropriate to leave on? He groaned inwardly at his own incompetence.

His only salvation was that Joyce seemed very clear about what she wanted. He let her lead. She took off her shirt, and so did he. They laid down and kissed some more, until she felt ready to remove the rest. Then they got under the covers and he did his best not to think. Thinking would only get in the way. Thoughts were the enemy of the people. Then she climbed on top, and he couldn't have formed a thought if he'd wanted to.

But all of them returned in a flood when they curled up together afterwards. He wanted to ask how he had done, but he imagined that would only make things worse. He settled on kissing her forehead. "You are beautiful," he said. That couldn't be wrong. Could it?

"You're not so bad yourself," she said. Not so bad. He would take that.

They laid quietly for a while. "I should go," she said. "I have to be at work by six tomorrow. And Will's going to wonder where I went."

He was disappointed, but he tried not to show it. They got dressed and he walked her to the door. "Can I take you to dinner some time?" he asked.

"Maybe you could come over on Sunday," she said. She quickly kissed him and was gone. He went and laid back on the bed. The pillow smelled like her. He smiled. There was a long way to go before he could begin to say she was his. But they had taken the first step.